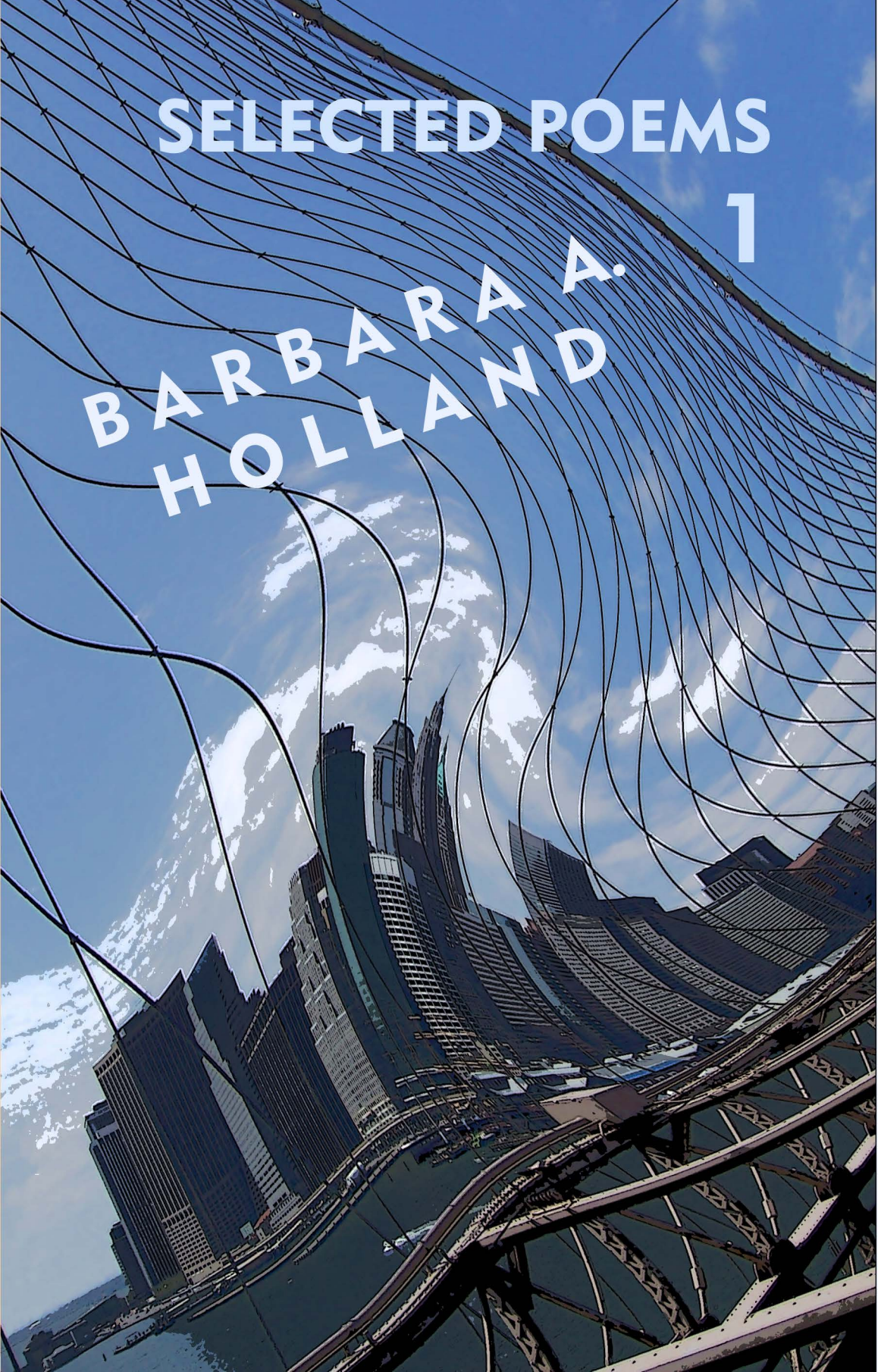


# SELECTED POEMS

1

BARBARA A.  
HOLLAND







Also by BARBARA A. HOLLAND

POETRY

*After Hours in Bohemia* (2020)  
*Autumn Numbers* (1980)  
*Autumn Wizard* (1973)  
*The Beckoning Eye* (2019)  
*Burrs* (1977, 1981)  
*Collected Poems Volume 1* (1980)  
*Crises of Rejuvenation* (1973-75, 1985)  
*The Edwardian Poems & The Queen of Swords* (1991)  
*Lens, Light & Sound* (1968)  
*Medusa: The Lost First Chapbook* (2019)  
*Melusine Discovered* (1975)  
*On This High Hill* (1974)  
*Penny Arcana* (n.d.)  
*Running Backwards* (1983)  
*Out of Avernus* (2019)  
*The Secret Agent* (2019)  
*The Shipping on the Styx* (2019)  
*You Could Die Laughing* (1975)



# SELECTED POEMS

VOLUME 1

BARBARA A.  
HOLLAND

Edited and Annotated by  
BRETT RUTHERFORD

THE POET'S PRESS  
*Pittsburgh, PA*



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## CONTENTS

FOREWORD 13

### A GAME OF SCRAPS

Scavenger	19
Strange Arrival	20
So Much for Innocence	21
The Comedy of Pain	22
Loafers of A Saturday Night	23
The House That Never Was	23
A Game of Scraps	24
Turncoat Night	25
This Incarnation	26
Side Issues	27

### AFTER HOURS IN BOHEMIA

In Residence	30
Façade	31
Terrorist	32
A Street of Many Shoulders	33
Museum	34
At Death of Time	35
Playground of the Losers	36
Near Enough to Tease	37
Stars Over Grove Street	38
Mocha	39
From the Hands of the Counterman	40
Night-Frosted Tompkins Square	41
The Crusader	42
Sidewalk Cafe	43
An Old Door	44
Time of Waiting	45
The Call of Carnival Street	46
The Moment of Truth	47
Parochial Obsession	48

After Hours in Bohemia	49
East From Here	50
Rooftop Orators	51
Celia at the Bus Stop	52
Sipping Ouzo	53
House Monsters	54
November at Rockaway Beach	55
Subway Exit	56
Hesperus	57
Midsummer Mania	58
Holding On	59
In the Mirror	60
Background Music	61
A Meditation on André Breton	62
The Plaintiff	63
On Monday	64
Descending the Spiral Staircase	64

#### AT BREAKING POINT OF SKY

The Gem Dweller	68
Stabs from the Sun	69
Dark Autumn	70
When Stones Have Shed Their Skins	71
Not As the Crippled Tree	72
The Valley of Little Thunders	73
Leaf-Surf and Stone	74
The Road Ahead	74
Gathering Storm	75
Only for Birds	76
Sea Branch in Sand	77
Variations	78
Light Wind and a Locomotive	79
String Figures in a Grove	80
Challenge	81
At Breaking Point of Sky	82
Possibly One Day	83
And Finally the Moon	83
A Meditation on Space	84



Summer Night-Walk	85
On Monday	85
Please Come Home	86
Them	87
In the Strength of the Moon	88
November	89
New England Overcast	90
This Frowsty Autumn	91
Surf and Snow	92
A Day for a Great Adventure	94
The Fire-Breathing Spring	95

#### IN SUDDEN SECRET

The Braggart Hilt	98
Draughts of Cacophony	99
The Voice of Now	99
In a Year's Turning	100
When Brash Worlds Live	101
Rubbish to Burn	102
On the Midway	103
Breaking the Curse of Blankness	104
In Sudden Secret	105
Optical Illusions	106
Where Tension Is	106
Collecting the Echoes	107
Left-Over Laughter	108
The Ache of Eavesdropping	109
Not This Time	110
So Long Forgotten	111
All About Eddie	112
The Most Unwholesome Tax	113
King-Maker	114
A Special Thought for Shrewsday	115
Unwanted Foreigner	116
Nostalgia	116
The Mark of the Leaf	117
Bohemian Philadelphia	118
Shifting Gears	119

The House That Should Be	120
In Memoriam	121
Whither the Road	122
Days of Resurrection	123
Before the Interview	124
Old Gold	125
In the Cavern of the Carnivores	126
No More No Less Than This	127
At the Top of the Stairs	128
Your Kind of Beauty	129

#### BAD COMPANY

Huldra	132
The Consultation	134
Next to Nothing	135
Elegy for Alexis	136
Always One More Time	138
Bad Company	139
Moon Drinker	140
The Call of the Timkling Cymbals	141
East Hill in a Summer Rain	142
On Hoving's Hill	144
St. Mark's Church in the Bouwerie: Offertorium	146
Ride Up the Wind	148
A Repetition of Three	149
Protest from a Singular Profession	150
A Poet Declaims in a Graveyard	152
Orient Moon	153
Scherzo at Lavalette Beach	154
The Buddha in Milky Quartz	156
Familiar Creatures	157
Arachne	158

## OUT OF AVERNUS

Medusa	162
The Last Plantagenet	163
Black Sabbath	164
The Argo	169
The Sybil of Cumae	172
Coffee House Poet	173
Portrait of Lazarus	174
Through Snow, Under Blackened Moon	176
The Hymn of the Rocks	178
Melusine Discovered	180
Melusine, Our Sister	182
Eurydice	183
The Apples of Sodom and Gomorrah	184
Recollections of a Memorable Man	187
Early on Christmas Morning	188
Emily Dickinson	189
Martha	190
Mary Dancing: A Statue	191
The Witch Ages	192

## YOU COULD DIE LAUGHING

Breaking Down the Night	194
From An Open Window	195
Photograph of a Reflection	197
Return This Note Rewritten	198
Mad Song	199
Terror on Cornelia Street	201
The Pitch	202
In the Nick of Time	203
In the Mesh of Maya	204
No Common Goblet	205
A Party Any Time	206
You Could Die Laughing	207
Bantam Executive	208
Vectors of Advice	209
Last Rites	210
Dracula	212

## TOWARD MAGRITTE

Krishna in the Afternoon	214
Exeunt	215
Shamballah	216
The Feather-Painting Lunatic	218
The Wheel Resumes	219
Strange Forest	220
The Full-Stop Door	221
Water Baby	222
Celebration of the Self	223
To Make the Desert Bloom	224
UFO	225
The Archetypal Evening	226

## ABOUT THE POET 227

## ABOUT THIS BOOK 230



SELECTED POEMS

VOLUME 1





## FOREWORD

This publication is the first of two volumes bringing together the selected works of America's great imaginative poet, Barbara A. Holland (1925-1988). It is based upon a 112-page edition published in 1980 and ambitiously titled *Collected Poems*. At that time, the second volume was intended to be Holland's cycle of poems centered around the paintings of René Magritte, titled *Crises of Rejuvenation* and originally published in two volumes in 1973 and 1974.

Only a few hundred copies of *Collected Poems* were circulated. After the poet's death in 1988, the project fell into limbo. *Crises of Rejuvenation* remained in print, but these early poems fell out of sight.

When the Poet's Press received the manuscripts and notebooks of Barbara Holland in 2019, replete with several unpublished book manuscripts, hundreds of poems that had appeared only in magazines, and hundreds more in various stages of draft in notebooks, it became clear that it was unwise ever to have called the 1980 project "collected poems." We may never see all of this poet's output, since few manuscripts survive of hundreds of poems that appeared in obscure little magazines.

The first volume, which I compiled with the poet in 1980, should instead be regarded as the commencement of her "Selected Poems," a still-living poet's choice of the works she wanted to preserve. A number of poems had previously appeared only in magazines, many of them already extinct by 1980. Additionally, we included the complete text of her earlier chapbooks: *A Game of Scraps*; *Penny Arcana*; *Melusine Discovered*; *On This High Hill*; *Lens, Light & Sound*; and *You Could Die Laughing*. The poems from an unpublished chapbook, *East from Here*, were likewise included.

In 1983, during a period when The Poet's Press was on hiatus, Holland worked with Patricia Fillingham of Warthog Press on a different "Selected Poems" edition, titled *Running Backwards*. That 260-page production included many poems that had already appeared in the 1980 volume, most of the Magritte poems from *Crises of Rejuvenation*, and a number of additional poems. The present volume leaves the Magritte poems for Volume 2 of this series, retains all of



the original 1980 *Collected Poems*, and adds all the items which were unique to *Running Backwards*.

My initial intention had been to maintain the author's original order, and to title each segment according to the chapbooks in which they originally appeared. This method had its benefits in that it revealed the development of the poet through several "periods," but offered the serious defect of leaving related poems scores of pages from one another.

I believed, however, that a long volume of poetry should have a dramatic structure of its own — a beginning, a middle and an end. Few readers will want to undertake these more than 100 poems at a single sitting, so that any attempt to structure such a vast number of poems cannot meet with success. Accepting this reality, the poet and I re-arranged the poems into shorter segments. Each segment brought together poems related either in theme or mood; each segment demonstrated the poet's talents in a given type of poetic effort; and each segment may be read as a separate "chapter" or "chapbook" in itself. What is lost in chronological interest will be gained by the general reader as a more coherent and pleasurable book.

*A Game of Scraps* introduces the author and her New York City surroundings, followed by *After Hours in Bohemia*, which evokes the beauty and alienation of the poet's life in Manhattan even more intensely.

In *At Breaking Point of Sky*, we turn to the natural world rather than that of human artifacts.

*In Sudden Secret* is devoted to self-revelation.

Later segments of this book show us the poet's imagination run riot. In *Bad Company*, we are treated to a host of monsters and fantastics, while *Out of Avernus* plunges into the deep well of myth and lore, from Pallas Athena to the unfortunate Melusine. And quite properly, poems about other poets are included here where they belong — with the gods!

Whimsy takes the reins in *You Could Die Laughing*. Here the poet rehearses the kind of almost surreal twists that characterize *Crises of Rejuvenation*, her 90-poem cycle whose integral reprint will comprise Volume 2 of this series. In anticipation of that volume, whose guiding spirit is the imagery of René Magritte, we end this one with a segment called *Toward Magritte*.

The unique poems from *Running Backwards* have been distributed among the sections of this book, according to theme or mood.

My work on the Barbara A. Holland papers has yielded five new compilations of her poetry, adding vastly to the corpus of her poems. This project is not yet done, but should be completed in 2020.

Where does *Selected Poems* fit in this overall project? It should be regarded as the poet's personal choice, from 1980 and 1983, rescued from chapbooks and magazines, of the poems she regarded as her best, in their final form. Some annotations have been added, and some punctuation (commas and hyphens) have been added, in keeping with the overall editing of the Barbara A. Holland papers that became available in 2019. I have annotated a few poems to clarify obscure words or to provide context.

The second volume will include the Magritte-inspired poems, with notes based on interviews with Holland. Finally, *After Hours in Bohemia* will collect the remaining manuscript poems and poems recovered and reconstructed from notebooks, plus a number of critical essays about the poet and her work.

— Brett Rutherford  
Pittsburgh, February 19, 2020





# A GAME OF SCRAPS



## SCAVENGER

---



AM A WANDERER with dirty feet  
peering through the ventails<sup>1</sup>  
of the visored faces,  
sniffing the breaths of open doors,  
waiting beneath the ledges  
of the careless windows  
for sounds that might spill over  
for my claws to catch

and crack for the extraction of a swarm of things,  
large-eyed and cat-foot careful  
of the nerves they walk.

I am a brokerage for shares in storms;  
the mendicant, more bowl than ego, hollowed up  
to lurch of moon, a dagger catcher stopping Leonids.<sup>2</sup>  
I am the prowler of the noon-white streets,  
the closet audience of somnambulists, the ear  
that bites, the eye that masticates, the nerve that sings.  
I am the wanderer with dirty feet  
who wipes worlds from existence by removing dirt.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ventail*. The movable part of the front of a medieval helmet.

<sup>2</sup> *Leonids*. An autumn meteor shower, appearing to originate in the constellation of Leo.

## STRANGE ARRIVAL

---

Were I to lean against you  
you would be soft as air to me,  
would not support me.

Were I to try to touch you  
you would shrink inside  
as shadow into gnomon  
on the boss of noon  
would be intangible.

Were I to seek you out  
on maps papered  
to the lining of my skull,  
you would feel my crayon  
run your lifeline  
down my palm, would scold me,  
for importunate advances  
should remain invisible.

Shadow Monster,  
we are twinned upon  
one tide that swings a year  
to me again, and you  
as well, against  
the better judgment  
of my own command  
into the long pull  
of your breathing,

at a snow flick  
on my wrist, at breath  
of shadow before it falls  
upon me after long  
separation ending,  
limps in acquiescence  
to inevitable odds.



Gratefully I weaken  
to your welcoming,  
inlock the lies that guard you  
from your sovereign self.

## **SO MUCH FOR INNOCENCE**

---

There is no getting at you,  
no passing those eyelids.

The lashes laid out  
on your cheek  
are final.

Your face is locked,

but you are still in there.  
Your shadow lives  
on the window blind,

busied with your personal  
rites of the moon,

and no candle  
to show for it.

Your listening leans  
hard against the inside  
of your forehead,

recording  
me.

## THE COMEDY OF PAIN

---

If this is where I hope to seal myself  
against the leaching in of influence that swells  
mid-trunk to knife-edged rock that saws through fibres,  
or, in their greatness, springs my frame apart,  
I know I cannot trust, press hard  
on costume fabric made to bear  
a short-run sputtering of spotlight gold  
which tears at touch. I cannot walk a floor  
condemned of unsure planks. I hope,  
but hope must mince across uncertain wood.

Should force be loosed through dog-howl loss,  
this gesture of a moon might fray  
to crumbs against the onyx stares of bolted doors  
street-length inimical, where once I found  
in show-brash mockery a gamin laugh that stripped  
the soft rot of self-pity from my banishment, and sneered  
my anger into snake-hide of a harlequin.

## **LOAFERS OF A SATURDAY NIGHT**

---

Walking among my whence, I watch them, propped  
against the moment, unconcerned with when or where;  
some cast  
from Molière into swagger clothes. Their burnished hair  
helmets their structure of indifference and frames  
their faces with the narrowness of scorn. My ways  
through thorn-breaks of my own are knotted, slit  
by the implication of slack swords which arrogance  
fits into idle fists. I set my jaw against  
my latest flow of words and knock them out  
from sockets where their sounds have lodged. Along  
this nugget-plucking way my monitors  
toss loose change to the wind, and pick my locks.

## **THE HOUSE THAT NEVER WAS**

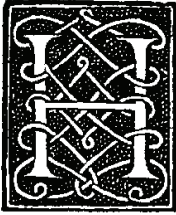
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Locked between walls and the roof the light has made  
against surrounding drain of people, I forget  
that Time progresses as it does outside,  
but here, there is so little change.

A light or two goes out. The promenade  
goes on. Heat presses evenly from herd backed up  
by simple obstacles till heat and light  
have domed us over in an airless room.  
Emergence into darkness brings relief. I stagger out  
as from confinement in a basement, reel as Time  
comes head-down hunched at me, when we collide,  
I with the stopped clock stuck upon an hour  
that played itself so many hour-lengths over,  
knocked into morning, and Time eating up  
all but the staleness that the night forgot.

## A GAME OF SCRAPS

---



OW CAN THEY crowd me out, or buffet me  
to gutter-walk with groundlings?

Where these courtiers slouch  
the shuffling service of their  
cardboard kings,  
no one shall threaten me.

No figurante<sup>3</sup> lurks crouched  
to lash at me. Fists flourish, spattering the light  
to showers of counterfeit where I have crashed  
a bull-charge through their midst. Now that I come,  
I carry my own here through this melange  
of taut immediacies, and pick them off,  
as with a lath, the teeth of picket fence  
in serrate slur of contact, with contempt. I touch,  
yet only feel the objects of my choosing.

This is a game of scraps. I snatch the best.  
The second-best are got by accident, some caught  
on hooked excrescences of mind while others wrap  
their lengths about my ankles. What I bring  
out of this witch-crazed moment I shall turn  
to uses of my own, rebuild, rewire, reactivate with sound  
until I come once more this way inside myself,  
the weft of this night's dances on my back.

---

<sup>3</sup> *Figurante*. A stage character with a non-speaking role; a supernumerary.

## **TURNCOAT NIGHT**

---

Hostility seeps out. Each door that gapes  
a crack-breadth reeks of it. Scowls follow me,  
measure my time of staying till impatience boils  
and sends me from unfinished eating. Eye-slot stares  
guard cash, answer my questions, order my exit, out  
upon announcements of the absences of friends  
cut off through back-slit dealing. Even the singers left  
on rankness of indifference, including one returned  
to penny cups when others passed me by in charity.

The proffered hand rolls tightwad into bludgeon,  
curled hard over fist-core coldness  
as the horns blow insolence.

## THIS INCARNATION

---

I should be  
shaking off layers  
of experience

until all  
the shedding ceases  
at the pivotal  
nothing,

and I am  
the identical portrait  
of everyone,

of all,

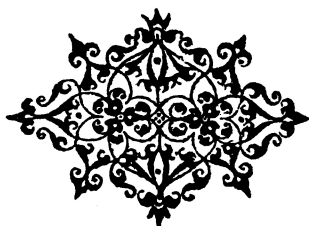
but rather,  
I am being hammered  
by the beat  
of my heart

into the vortex  
of an absence.

## SIDE ISSUES

---

Above this yelp of lights the milk-soft moon  
hangs tentative, remains irrelevant. One blot  
cornered midcourse in climbing, may be flicked aside,  
but not my candle or its finial<sup>4</sup> that sprouts  
above the shuffling of uncertain feet, for mine  
are quite decided. What I get, I want,  
or I would not be scuffled to a nail-head stop  
as foreign gem-grit in an oyster shell, nor yet  
be shouldered from the curbstone to the gutter if the gain  
did not outweigh the trouble. There are knots  
in this rat-tail worth untying which, if not untied,  
would hitch me sky-slipped crooked, and irrelevant.



---

<sup>4</sup> *Finial*. An ornamental top to a tower or roof; here, most likely, a decoration at the top of a candle-holder.







AFTER HOURS  
IN BOHEMIA

## IN RESIDENCE

---

These nights your window  
loosens a single wing,  
just one reflected glass  
cross-hatched against the dark,  
creaking

perhaps  
as if in gladness.

The rectangle behind it glows  
as if someone  
were there.

No shadow ever seems  
to cross it.

The swinging casement  
indicates a lack of air,  
a longing  
to leap down and dance  
among the leaves

which bounds the window  
momentarily  
above the shadowed park  
and lends it a code of slashes.

My heart rejoices  
in the glare of the bookstore  
on the corner across the street  
with its negative blind  
rolled down  
across the door.

## FAÇADE

---

A rain that takes no pleasure in its falling  
ceases, hangs, swells, and sits down on all  
outside the costly welcome of an open door and grid,<sup>5</sup>  
through which a pair of sullen eyes  
kindle no fires in empty pockets. Underfoot  
moisture intensifies. The pack behind, all fists,  
elbows, and blunted antlers, leans upon the backs  
of those out for a walk, scuff slowed to scrape  
and full stop by a palisade of backs that go  
as far as backs in front allow.

No one may trust the light to dry him,  
the marquee to cut the rainfall, now that the wet encases,  
battering from overhead proving too primitive.

A voice of rust and tin-can edge of jaggedness  
announces law which tolerates no standing around theaters,  
though theaters stand where crowds are forced to stop.

Move *them* instead. Move doors and photographs,  
the masquerade of loud life at the mud-thick core  
of baffled rage. Move all this puff of personality, that steps  
and frontage may be kept whatever way  
the law would have them. Wetness drives,  
immobilizes. Take that theater home. The rest of us  
have problems which are getting wet.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Grid*. Presumably a grated window of the theater's ticket booth.

## **TERRORIST**

The sun strides bully-fisted through the streets  
seeking a head to smash, and where he walks  
I shall not go. I dye my limbs a summer brown in dark  
of curtained contemplation, lie upon  
a long day's waiting as the fan keeps up  
a wind in place of wind the sun had killed and hauled  
into the court to crumble. As the night  
strengthens, I straighten up and dress for peace.

Grains of the dead wind stick to sweat of legs  
as footsteps send them from the sidewalk. Suddenly,  
an adolescent breeze breaks from the alley mouth,  
swaggers in my direction, brushes me,  
and flicks the ashes of its father from my arm.  
Tomorrow, walls will hide me while the sun seeks out  
another wind to strangle, and a will to break.

## A STREET OF MANY SHOULDERS

---



HIS IS A STREET of many shoulders: bare  
shoulders,  
shirted and leather shoulders,  
shoulders in suits,  
and rope-rough woolen shoulders;  
crouched and cunning shoulders,  
shoulders spread to bear

wide snows of ermine and rich dyes,  
shoulders high-pitched and gabled down to siphon off  
despair through drainpipe arms to clench of fingers,  
knotted and knuckled on frustration:  
shoulders collared up around the ears  
braced by the buttress arms and rooted fast  
in pockets where the hands, tendriled to change,  
take sustenance from keys; shoulders so high  
that elbows proxy for them in dispute with cheek,  
eye-glassed, bridge of nose, or hat, and shoulders turned  
to hanging gardens of indifference,  
or sword-hilt shoulders stretched  
to the ultimate in all the limited  
coffin-cornered outreach of the prude,  
and finally, non-shoulders. Such have I,  
whose unaccomplished shoulders fail to answer back in kind  
to the lecherous lean, the short shove and the ram,  
so often that I flinch my eyes aside  
to see if I am here, the only one,  
walking this street, who has no shoulders.

## MUSEUM

---

So much violence, so much heat and light,  
so much search for slaughter, so much greed,  
and all without disguise! The quick escape,  
the easy egress and the back way up  
across the roofs and downstairs into hidden doors.  
A shower of sparks, explosions, and a knife,  
pursued and pursuer, mesmerized police,  
all marked for delectation or for crossing out.  
Even the moon is counted off as maverick,  
kicked to a corner withering, but still in sight.  
Here danger bids us duck and marks our hiding place,  
raises a riot or a crowd, and disappears.



## AT DEATH OF TIME

---

Shrinkage, amputation and paralysis.  
A highway cut to pier-length by a tape of steel<sup>6</sup>  
once as sinuous as river, tense and set  
in burnished vengeance. Where the girders marched  
the length of loading shed, their feet  
are left stuck marching.

Like splinters tightly rooted in the skin,  
these pin-stuck people pierce their stance,  
sun-wisped to whisper girth, raisined  
and dwindled wire twist by the heat and wind  
dazed by the river, white in its waiting  
at the severed end of progress,  
deadened by a sun that hisses out  
both height and length, reduces  
movement that the face of death  
may quiver on the stiffened waters,  
as the last tramp pier to its termination  
nowhere, as people diminish  
yet remain alive.

---

<sup>6</sup> *A highway cut.* This poem may concern itself with the derelict truncation of the West Side Highway along the Hudson piers in Greenwich Village. The closed-down elevated highway took decades to demolish. Some piers were also abandoned with buildings and piers in various states of ruin.

## PLAYGROUND OF THE LOSERS

---



IF THESE are losers, tell me of their loss.  
They brag the status of the loser, strut  
a slight irregularity as if their trim  
had dimmed and roughened, puff it up  
to height of fashion out of shabbiness,  
prate of it counterclockwise, rounding blocks  
in widdershins of disarray, display it,  
pound it until the pavement, charged with it,  
throbs at the height of heartbeat, boast of it  
on hoardings in a host of faces washed in it  
who sell its slack-lust songs in dark cafes  
for nickels in a cup.

What is this loss  
that blossoms from their coats? A lack  
perhaps, of riches that they do not need  
and do not want, an insufficiency  
but not a loss. Point out just one  
cut out at midriff in a yelling hole  
that sucks a rain wind through it. Point out one  
listing for a lack of balance to the downward side,  
one with a face of gullies packed with salt  
deposited by tears, one reckless with  
his safety, courting death or injury  
through half-planned accident.

I see but one, drum major to his column  
or regiment that guards the final remnant of his pride,  
a dandy with a smile festooned across the truth,  
his ego trussed to saddle of a dancing mare —  
with hidden wires and rope. I see but one  
pretending conquest at the gate of loss  
whose play of fraudulence might well be fraud.

If these are losers, not a single rag of loss  
hangs, careless, from a pocket of unseeing eyes.

## NEAR ENOUGH TO TEASE

---

A half an hour from here, a few blocks east,  
or near enough to tantalize when walking  
dark emptiness to foot-song, when the jangling swells  
insistent in the upper skull, throngs in the caverned head  
sweat to congested stop. Grotesques and fops converge  
on consciousness. Light sweetens and the crackling stars  
tingle at back entrances of conversations, fall  
at scattered points along my arm, and I am pull  
and start. Legs which know their robot routes so well  
that I have wandered off course on my way to something else,  
once more, swing habit-driven, back and forth.

This time I shall not go. A barrier  
shuts out that territory, but not easily. The gate  
swings hinge-point singing that there is still time,  
still time within the week, within this life. A creak, a grin,  
a quick way out, immediate salve should sores break out  
from new infection, should old wounds, not yet healed,  
require the quick plunge in the forest self,  
of dark among bells and goblins, cloistered souls, and shapes  
whose closeness dulls the tub-beat of the brain-depth gong.

## STARS OVER GROVE STREET

---

Slum stars  
emaciated, underfed, cast  
bleary glances on this street  
of noise and of impatient cars  
which try to dissolve all obstacles  
at sound of horn, which bleat  
the stars to bleating back  
in wavering and senile voices,

all rusted out to rasp and gravel  
like the game-leg song  
forced up the nightclub steps  
and like the voice of one  
who has bubbled up on stale  
beer breath and overflows  
in sprawl upon the sidewalk,  
one who beats a surly gong  
and gets it back  
in gutter winks from overhead.

These stars are fumed  
to poverty and stagger on cheap wine,  
are driven back into their tenements  
by all this falling up  
and stumbling down, dithered  
half to death on jolts of jazz  
that jog, exhausted, back to Basin Street.

Beyond it all  
puddles of darkness  
and a single light that shouts  
a storefront width to hope,  
perhaps adventure  
and which draws moth-men and whirring women  
to the window. Wine in the rinds  
of geodes where the stars have sunk  
glazed alcoholic, greets them  
from amethyst which guards its wearer

against drunkenness. Choral anarchy  
and backslap, knowing leers  
from pyrite where the stars have made  
vitality half-vulgar in gross  
expenditure of wealth, hard-gained and early  
lost upon moth eyes, on sleazy cloth  
turned to hardware  
in bitter-snap of sequins,  
all counterfeit before a shrine  
of quartz, murmuring  
within its depths  
of stars to come.

## **MOCHA**

The hothead salvos of a maniac  
mounted on explosions charged the curb and shattered  
the bitterness that lined my throat. A troubled calm  
coated my swallowing with quinine strength  
when, all at once, a war-plunge, started from the gutter,  
ruptured the stuff of space in spurting demons forth  
to hurl a smash of crockery through window glass  
and scrape the last bitterness from roof of mouth.

How long till I regain that burnished savor,  
spread it beetle-back and lustrous  
on my outlook, taste it strong  
in purpose on the blandness of everyday depends  
on frequency of those who scorch the air for several yards,  
all to blow up at short catch  
of a traffic light in blood spurt stoppage  
of an undertone.

## FROM THE HANDS OF THE COUNTERMAN

---

Like a cat prowling  
beneath a Pharaoh's throne,

or like a Vestal Virgin  
bearing water in a sieve  
which leaks only  
a drop or two of time,

he comes with a pot  
of coffee, pours it  
with a steaming smile,

as if to give you  
what no saint was offered ever  
in the pleuroma<sup>7</sup> by any angel.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Pleuroma*. In Christian theology, a state of absolute fullness or completion.

## NIGHT-FROSTED TOMPKINS SQUARE

---



ERE FEET touch moon-death  
chill beneath a mist that frosts  
to semblance of cement  
beneath a winter web of stunted lamps,  
formal beyond formality of Lords,  
for even specters  
of forgotten courtiers move slowly  
as the light that shines through them  
makes whisper-density of shape and mass  
clouded to a mockery of flesh,

but here the stillness  
builds in marble, coffins space,  
cold cast immobilizing  
breath that even ghosts require  
as filling for their half-  
begun suggestions of humanity.

The gate is locked  
to those who walk here living.  
Once inside, a mortal  
is an outline of a man  
fumed thick with moats,

crowding and separating  
as his skeleton dissolves  
transparent, as the ground  
beneath him frees his feet  
from contact and he runs,  
becomes the act of running  
and remains no more a man  
until he breaks the gray gasp  
at the shop-lit street.

## THE CRUSADER

---

At prow between two walls  
high up among fire-stricken  
casement wings, in gilt of glass  
and setting sun, your discipline,  
the stone folds of your mantle,

resting linked hands of mail  
on hilt of broadsword, rooted  
in cement and pointing down  
to convocation of the ingest streets  
that lead your subjects to you  
unaware of scant ledge, heavy  
with your cross and crowns,  
high floors above their discontent.

Look in, back  
of your grime-packed eyes,  
beneath your casque,  
down clerestory aisles in panoply  
of battle-shredded banners,  
faded rags in rage of boar and eagle  
where the heroes lie,  
armored and ridged, exactly  
as you stand, niched into rectitude  
of narrowness above  
the swarms of small streets  
hived with hooded doors  
in all directions, carrying  
their hopes of livelihoods  
maintained, but not of heaven.

Blind beneath the level  
of the boughs laced over asphalt  
of tag and dog we keep our eyes  
under severe control, prevent escape  
to waywardness of open windows  
stars, and the cut-throat moon.



More stone than yours  
they prowl spasms of crooked streets.  
Their granite downs all progress  
of ascent to cornices, as yours  
may only rake the rooftops  
of the bank, or ride the long glide  
inwards on the stroke of nones.<sup>8</sup>

## **SIDEWALK CAFE**

---

We have five tables empty.  
Are you looking for a table?  
This way to the entrance.  
Are you missing someone?

People, what are you looking for?  
Your eyes are looking,  
but not your faces,  
searching into corners  
under plates, in cups.

Are you looking for an angry motorcycle,  
a mounted policeman,  
or a unicorn?

If you are looking  
for the doorway out,  
it is not for sale.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Nones*. A 3 p.m. religious service. My guess is that this poem depicts an architectural sculpture, perhaps overlooking Trinity Church in lower Manhattan.

## **AN OLD DOOR**

Gaunt recluse  
of a door at top of steep  
steps stretching tall within  
the shelter of a shallow niche,  
an introvert, a derelict afflicted  
with a tension which is more  
than cavity a doorknob left; roots,  
stem, and blossom having been removed,  
leaving only the hint-hole  
to the other side worn silent  
by a long-soured widowhood.

Throughout the day  
deep nests of shadows among the bone-thrusts  
waking through a ground of stone  
pocket their secrecy.

Words lose their way in wilderness  
of damp-wool-wadding jaws.  
Eyes seek escape in pent eave<sup>9</sup>  
points of sunlight patched to lids.

Three faces,  
full of what goes on behind them,  
hang out their silence  
for the eye to break at keystone  
of the overhanging arch  
above the door, at tops  
of barley sugar twists  
dividing windows.

The narrow wood retreats,  
its shrunken comprehension  
squeezed within the tight rule  
of pinched quadrilaterals,

---

<sup>9</sup> *Pent eave*. An overhanging eave that forms a shelter around a building.

an introvert whose ear at keyhole  
cannot rouse, whose censorship  
stuffs strands of long mustaches  
into granite mouths, locks up  
a span of history and stands on guard  
keeping time secluded in discarded rooms  
that no least sound or sight  
of it may pass the hill.  
*No garbage dumped, or rubbish under law.*<sup>10</sup>

## **TIME OF WAITING**

---

On subway platforms  
late-hour feet are hammers  
of loneliness. Hollow,  
as I, this sound  
that starts and stops  
which in no single step  
has called to me.

On subway platforms  
empty soda cans  
roll to the edge, roll off.

The coming train is full  
of you, yet the invisible  
feet of aimless hours  
are never yours.

Subways are sporadic songs  
that no one sings.

---

<sup>10</sup> *No garbage dumped...* An anti-littering sign posted in front of many New York apartment buildings, and on fences of empty lots.

## THE CALL OF CARNIVAL STREET

---

I hack the rind away, ream out, and hew  
the hard core from this flux that lards a cluttering  
that cramps and eases for no reason, whet my knife  
for lopping branches whipped against my eyes,  
    renew any axe  
in bite on motive. Why this shouldering,  
this hip-jut bruising and a cheapjack stance  
strike spurts of phrase and imagery down at dark of head  
only a nut-crack buffeting will tell.

The smell of challenge wakes upon the smash  
of light and crowd-push. Massiveness of block  
to roadway ruffles beast as growls unroll,  
breaking to words and phrases in a snarl that hangs  
a thought-width from my face. My sword sinks through,  
releasing strands that flutter in a whip and flash  
which I remember and which fall in place  
on walls, on table tops, on shoulder spans, or drop  
in full form, scum inscribed within my cup.

## THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

---

Knives in the sun,<sup>11</sup>  
half hidden in the hands  
slipped from the pocket,  
in display, in pride,  
threat hovering.

How much blood  
has been shed here,  
Park of a hundred faces  
and as many years  
in individual lives?

Danger lurks behind  
the lattices of shadows;  
quick feet and sudden steel.

The bongos romp  
over wreckage of stale honor.  
Danger in cramped lives,

in language strafing  
with syllables.

How many lives  
have been taken here,  
Park with a thousand faces  
and as many leaves,  
blowing for — how long?

How many atoms  
in the steel? Quick death!  
A never-changing sun.

---

<sup>11</sup> Knives in the sun. This is likely another poem about Tompkins Square, where an altercation between Puerto Rican youths and the hippies, musicians, the Hare Krishna acolytes, the local Ukrainian immigrants, and the police, reached a point of riot in 1966-1967 about the use of the park, a conflict which exploded again in the 1980s. The stabbing of a news reporter by a young Puerto Rican roiled the police and the city government.

## PAROCHIAL OBSESSION

---

Sleeved brown  
in sooty brick, this steeple  
lifts a hand  
furled into a fist  
that shouts imperatives  
of index finger

lifted to specific sky  
directly above the church  
and nowhere else.

Why there,  
and only there? with obdurate  
persistence, silence  
casts a vote of affirmation  
and upholds the gesture.

No sky  
but that which has been chosen  
suffers scrutiny  
as fertile ground  
for maturation  
of a miracle.

Follow  
the pointing finger  
up,  
up and up  
in burrowing through blue  
on climb beyond the highest  
cirrus station.

Nothing moves.  
A jet trail froths.

## AFTER HOURS IN BOHEMIA

---

The sign swung,  
singing tunelessly  
and bade me dance.

How shall I dance in this street  
of shrouded windows  
in front of those disapproving  
slots in walls  
under a mortuary lamp?

Something scrambles up ahead,  
slides, slewing sideways  
to my feet; a handbill  
promising a play that folded  
just two nights ago.

I only walk this narrowness  
seeking the sky-burns  
on the night left  
by the careless stars,

looking hopefully  
for ghosts up there,  
for there are none down here.

## **EAST FROM HERE**

Domes of umbrellas  
sailing past the door  
with a semblance  
of regularity:

palanquins  
crests of camel humps  
howdahs,  
pinnacles of god-carts.

Curl of the ram's horn.  
Coffee dying slowly in the cup.

A drift of rain,  
a tide of branches blowing from the east.

Raga, bales of silk  
from Basra,  
soaked and soiled.

A high ring  
run from ear through ear.

What will become of us?



## ROOFTOP ORATORS

---



ARGOYLES SQUAT on gutter edge of roofs.  
Stone heads pack full of stone in which  
no matter stirs,  
broken to action by electric flickering.  
Eyes bulge against the world and  
keep it back,  
unsorted in raw jumble of prolixity.

Life stumbles through the streets  
as drain-clog plentiful as rain,  
weighted with litter in a night-howl flood,  
bringing its abundance to the Gargoyle  
who consumes all that roars down on him  
and lets it shout its unassimilated bulk and flow,  
unaltered, through the waste-course of his gullet.

Beneath this deluge we are almost drowned,  
head crushed in roof-pitch wash-off and its thickening,  
which rose unprocessed to a granite head,  
and equally disorganized, poured, uncontrolled,  
through lips dragged open by a hanging under-jaw  
slung from a conduit mouth.

## CELIA AT THE BUS STOP

---

Her motionless face,  
just present, with no hair anywhere  
showing to soften it. All of it  
back inside the large scarf  
worn like the veil of a nun  
as she wears her eyelids  
down over anchorite eyes,

but her secret  
creeps with their brownness  
stealing glimpses until  
she sees that somebody  
notices, and orders them  
back like wayward children;

brown eyes as shields  
to keep her fun for sure  
from seeping through  
their opaque roundness,

yet a nip of joy  
comes still, a low glimmer  
through that gingerbread  
molded for the taking  
of her man.

## **SIPPING OUZO**

---

The cream cloud  
draws apart, the shock,  
concussion at the root of skull,  
in chill that spreads  
throughout the veins. A flavor  
sticky sweet and sickly,  
so it seems,

as down,  
forever down a freezing depth  
of stars away into a void  
of silver, you tumble,

helpless until the largest  
of all the stars that prickle  
through the murk explodes,  
or so it seems,

and spits up  
climbing trails of bubbles  
heaping high in shaking mounds  
of foam that trickles  
from the stem of goblet  
to the table,

as it seems.  
You try to lift the full weight  
of your iron head  
and drop it on your arm.

## HOUSE MONSTERS

---

Those little pets; their sleek hair  
shining and neatly groomed,  
their claws clipped,  
rapping across the floor  
and a sheen of tears  
across their amber eyes —

When they sit up  
on their compact haunches  
with their out-thrust forepaws  
festooned with strands of diamonds,

or with both paws clapped  
to the sides of a heaping compote,  
you would do well to be cautious.

There might be something  
wrong at the center of that  
delicious fudge, or the fruit  
might be off its proper savor  
or the cheese might harbor  
a wink of ground glass  
waiting. Be careful

of the begging claws, the sharp  
incisor. Somewhere there might  
be poised the glitter  
of a hungry knife.

## NOVEMBER AT ROCKAWAY BEACH

---

Rows of little bungalows  
with boards blinded, broken windows,  
stand in files along the beach  
battered by the wind and sand.

There she limps steadily  
with unflagging determination,  
squinting up at the race  
of scuds, her wet skirts  
nagging at her ankles,  
her imitation leather coat  
sprouting a spurious fur.

She scoops up treasure  
offered daily by the ocean,  
fights with the whip of hair  
across her face. Unconscious  
of the subtle odor of decay  
and death, she mumbles  
wordlets gummed together  
into the falsehood of that fur.

## **SUBWAY EXIT**

---

It had to be he.

He was always like that;  
always going away;  
always his long  
familiar back;  
his giveaway gait,

going,

while keeping his face  
where he was going,

keeping his identity  
untapped,

just as he was at this moment;

ten steps upward  
and ahead of me,

keeping his face in sun  
and street for recognition.

Was I to crush against  
the wall and pass him?

to call out his name  
as if to spin him backward?

or watch his back  
receding —  
if it were he?

## HESPERUS

---

Last night I saw you.  
John Berryman, braving an  
after-thought  
of sunlight with a splintering glare,

whistling insidiously  
through the scurrying bands  
of chimney-top ventilators.

With several of your experimental  
fists, you struck  
at a rind of moon.

Still at it, aren't you,  
dancing like a child denied!

Unsatisfied with all  
your hard-earned varieties,  
you still insist,

inhabit a tear  
and, inside it, try on  
a multitude of lives, then dim  
and nearly drown,

but the next sunset  
brings you back, spiked and scaly.

That nail, which last night  
hammered between my eyebrows,  
was never Venus.

# MIDSUMMER MANIA

---

*For Eunice Wolfgram*

Yes, lady, we are all agreed  
that certain women  
may transform themselves  
into were-wolves, nuns, parking lots  
and grand pianos  
when the moon ripens  
with unbearable fragrance;

that it is they,  
who have access to those pills  
which make the darkest hair  
burn purple, streaked with green  
by daylight, without assistance  
from color television,

and that there are  
yet other women, trained  
to hornpipe their homes  
into holocausts;

the same,  
whose children's skulls,  
bristle antlers through their hair,  
when the footfalls  
on their right  
plant briars.

By all means, yes,  
incredible woman.

Yes is a chemical reaction.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> *Yes is a chemical reaction* was an advertising slogan for Chemical Bank.



## **HOLDING ON**

---

Shadows filled the pocket  
on his right,  
                    which was flat,  
the left one  
ran over with colors  
bulging.

He had laughter  
tucked into his cuffs  
as he stood on the corner  
by the lamp post  
with both hands clamped  
on his bicycle handlebars,  
until that one moment  
when a sneeze caught him  
and they both flew up in his face,

when the bicycle shuddered,  
stood tall on its wheels  
and rattled into traffic  
on its own,

                    while the sun  
stood up on the pedals  
shouting brightness —

blindingly alone.

## IN THE MIRROR

---

Your face, square, sure  
of itself from over my shoulder,  
peeks out beside mine  
from behind my reflection.

How you do it I shall not  
strain to imagine, but you are there  
like a low-grade fever.

Not all the time,  
but fading until almost  
nonexistent. Then strengthening  
again to almost a greater  
reality than mine.

I wonder  
how often, if ever,  
others see you there;  
if sometimes  
you are visible to others,  
but not to me,

or visible at times  
when I am not,  
and if so,  
how much of you

how much?

## **BACKGROUND MUSIC**

---

He has always had a few  
loose pieces in his head, and sometimes  
they jingle loudly.

They are not about  
to fall out of his ears,

to bore through his skull  
and dance in his hair,

nor will their place  
of confinement split in two  
hinged halves

and rattle  
like a castanet,

but his speech  
may be accentuated often  
by an agitation  
of bells,  
[as] yours may, [too].

I disregard them.

## A MEDITATION ON ANDRÉ BRETON

---

For Breton, a picture  
was always a window opened  
on something,  
but the question was —  
on *what?*

For me. a poem  
is always a hole bitten out of,  
or smashed through most of,  
the middle of a sheet of paper,  
obscuring something,  
and the question remains —  
of *what?*

but somehow there is always  
someone  
lacking in the energy  
to drive the fist,  
the strength in the jaws  
to bite,  
but who,  
instead, prefers to scribble  
on that surface,  
leaving it unmolested,

as if whatever had been  
written there  
would substitute  
for that which remained  
behind it,  
and the question is —  
for *what?*

## **THE PLAINTIFF**

---

Slouching with one shoulder  
raised higher than the other  
on the courtroom bench,  
slumped into the notion of hiding,

her small, pinched face  
peeks out through a rift  
in the long black  
mourning of her hair.

She listens attentively  
as the lawyers condemn her past;  
the drugs, the drifting  
almost as if they must be  
speaking of someone else.

Who was that young woman  
anyway, who so long ago  
bought speed in the parking lots  
along the highway?

Surely not the owner  
of this loneliness,  
this pain that drags  
her mouth down sidelong,  
of this pixie face  
and its doughty  
experimental smile.

## ON MONDAY

---

When the wind  
wears the clothes  
which I hang  
on the line,

the wind looks  
much better than I  
when I wear them.

An actor of talent,  
that wind!

## DESCENDING THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE

---

How would you descend  
from the pulpit  
if you were the priest?  
Would you turn your back  
to the congregation and feel  
at the air with one foot  
experimentally, and with both hands  
on the railings, back down  
with your mind in your feet  
one foot by the other  
while the worshippers yawn,

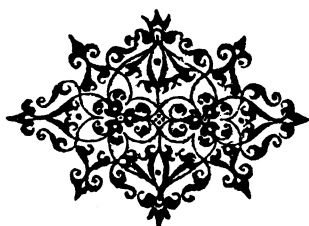
like a house painter  
on a ladder  
which he cannot trust?

Or would you, like a man of God,  
be done with all caution and descend  
the steps as if they were a sturdy staircase  
instead of a grosgrain

ribbon of cast iron slung  
high on the air, treading  
its delicacy with a seeming courage  
even if your balance  
might play the traitor?

Can you observe yourself  
as if from a safe position  
and watch the subject walking  
down the steep spiral of narrow,  
scarcely-guarded stairs with ease?  
You are practiced, a steeplejack,  
and also you, the attentive watcher.

Follow yourself closely with your eyes  
until you take the final step  
to safety on the level  
where your nerve collapses.









AT BREAKING POINT  
OF SKY

## THE GEM DWELLER

---

I hear you  
towering. Galena breaks  
beneath your surface  
coming up to eyes that steel  
against defilement.

Quartz bursts your smile  
to drifts of sun  
through seep of fog  
to fractured brain-wrack whiteness.

Malachite mellows  
along your summering  
at creep of eye as mischief  
of a brilliance tossed  
by leaves to rollick  
barefoot on the rain-sprung moss  
and slow.

At sleek of calcite,  
rivering grease wavered  
rhymed downwards in a burn  
of oil over grief of glass,

I know that you heal  
all that you touch with unguent  
of the moon as if the selenite  
that creams your voice  
had never been sufficient  
to inform me of the sly-glance  
sweetness of you, had not come  
pearl in the night-warmth  
of your words.

I hear you  
inch by inch  
                castled to share  
to send me self-down wandering  
through depths of stone  
through grape-toothed ways  
of amethyst, and then  
alone, to climb the long road  
back into your eyes.<sup>13</sup>

## **STABS FROM THE SUN**

---

How is protection  
from your hard-hurled blast  
to stand against the hay-hot  
sweetness of your summering?

Windows and doors will drink it  
in until the gilded bird  
creeks round a bitter arc  
and shrieks a moonlight  
withering throughout the night  
leaving a knot of dying  
where my breath stopped short.

---

<sup>13</sup> This poem, a catalog of gemstones, shows the influence of Holland's mentor, Ree Dragonette. See also "When Stones Have Shed Their Skins."

## **DARK AUTUMN**

---

Dark strands of hair  
across the walks. Torn hair  
streaming from an undertow of Autumn.

Grains of dust flow  
in continuous tresses, scud  
the surfaces of paving. Afternoons  
weaken with overwork.

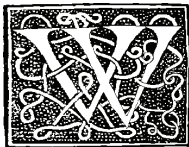
Beneath the benches  
desperation tears at tufts  
and pulls them out.

Tell me that no ghost  
sits and combs black filings  
from the thinning of its Autumn hair  
and strews them on the ground.

The march of pale lamps  
baleful in the dusk, blink  
into command where madness sits  
flailing battered wisps  
across the moon and drums  
the broken slats of benches  
with an Autumn mind.

## WHEN STONES HAVE SHED THEIR SKINS

---



HO CAN SAY there are no souls in stones,  
and who can look at Kunzite  
and say that they have bodies,  
gauze ripped from the garments of the sun,  
a plumage shed by luminous  
transparent birds, spent splinters of the morning,

mineral and miracle, held at its climax  
in a sheath of stone,  
gossamer against its ending?

Youth, northern, frangible inside  
drops of blue opal as if dawn had bled  
its earliest moments, as if clots of sky  
concealed in stone, had been preserved  
before the daylight killed it;

all the weathers of the world in quartz;  
mist-depths of white sand-shallows in aquamarine  
on frost of breath inside a shell of stone  
take life from light and strain at carapace  
until the day its long endurance breaks  
before eternal pressure from within.  
Who would be surprised? Not even God  
would have expected it?

What must the winds bear up  
when stones have hatched:  
what wings shall fan  
the cold fires of the stars  
or beat to warmth the white  
heart of the moon  
when stones have shed their skins?

## NOT AS THE CRIPPLED TREE

---

Not for you the dagger-cast of ice  
slipped as a severed sleeve  
and sloughed to earth. Too stout of trunk are you  
to wear decay as ornament  
and molder picturesquely in a swamp.

If tree, how much more tree are you than branch,  
thick as the shank of forest starveling;  
how much more than twig,  
for twig-like, you have slit the moon across,  
that sudden wind, would with a flourish  
split it halved, could rob that roundness  
of its structure in a snap,  
sparked from the sprout of premise?

You rob the hollow curve down dark  
of half-mind heritage. The old  
unquestioned formula evolves,  
encrusts in rough of bark, becomes  
leafed with a splash of lenses  
in which sunlight plays magic,  
which you know can wound, and know  
too well how deeply, too well  
to dangle talismans to blind the birds,  
too thoroughly to let them  
lance the stuff of self.

## THE VALLEY OF LITTLE THUNDERS

---

Something matures,  
enlarges here, drinks its vitality  
from moisture,  
develops a precarious ability to stand,  
has yet to get about  
without stumbling,  
catching on objects  
when passing them or tilting  
heavily to the side and falling,

wallows as if without legs  
and revolves in its den  
among the mountains, digging it deeper  
and enlarging its circumference.

In some uninhabited hollow,  
skirted by ridges and made safe  
by the highest hills, whose spines  
are roads, blocked in  
by scrub and woodland, this continuous  
ripening buzzes its gain  
in weight and size in a low roar,  
muffled as if deeply buried.

Vibrations, running underground  
beneath the ridges,  
excite the small leaves of the undergrowth  
into a nervous fluttering,  
then every tree stands as if paralyzed  
and the grass is untouched by wind.

Ask nothing  
about anything you notice  
here. Your ignorance is sacred.

## **LEAF-SURF AND STONE**

---

Waves of feathers spatter on the walls,  
in fern-dance boiling, leap to window ledge.

Waves of feathers spatter on the walls  
where eyes that own the windows watch their falls,  
retreats and pounces when the frond-spray calls  
to room depths, scattering past wind-world edge.

Waves of feathers spatter on the walls  
in fern dance boiling, leap to window ledge.

## **THE ROAD AHEAD**

---

It is wet. It must be,  
drinking the blue  
from the sky as it does,  
and flexing its breadth,

but as you approach,  
it pulls apart  
and your wheels are dry;

the blacktop,  
a quote from a sunblast,

and incredibly boring.



## GATHERING STORM

---

The message bobs  
on the green air  
of early evening;

a tight swarm of querulous  
innuendoes leads nowhere,  
dips and ascends,

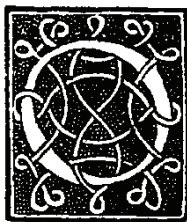
pauses at ear level,  
flirts with the treachery  
of nettles, withdraws  
among the lowest leaves.

The thunder flexes muscles,  
waits. It is time that  
the foothills were breaking  
the last frail tissue  
of sleep and stirring.

The full growth  
of the mountains  
will roll over later.

## ONLY FOR BIRDS

---



NLY FOR BROKEN necklaces of birds  
severed in flight and rearranged,  
new-linked, though loosely locked  
my sky-filled eyes well up  
against the light as if the high-tide  
tears were slowly rising,  
as if upon their gloss

a mystery had been reflected  
confused by tilt of head,  
by shift of shadow, lost  
in the hardening of reticence.

Clouds cross the cornea,  
now open to the easy loyalties  
of hosting birds, bead shot  
through grain of iris  
as if lashes never had flattened  
beneath the sluice of acrid waters,  
as if the clouds of birds had always  
traversed space that once flashed  
fitfully with wings and swords,  
palladia burnt out upon the idiot night.

Not now the Gorgon  
in the hour of truce  
in face cast up to evening  
some day to be as crazed with wickering  
of furrows left behind  
on nettled skin laid over ache:

hunger beneath the boles  
of rot-soft trees and loneliness  
along clay thirst and dust of leaves  
as once before when all the sap  
of springs and creeks lay dead.

Medusa sleeps at dusk.  
Her eyes no longer mine, close  
with the density of darkness, liberate  
my eyes to wander with the random  
birds, to float decisive  
in the wake of clouds.

## **SEA BRANCH IN SAND**

---

Who lies half-buried in the sand?  
Whose arm and shoulder curve as a swimmer's,  
sun-deep in underglow of moon-wilt silvering,  
pulling at tug of grains packed into  
will of weight upon it?

That day when sudden wrench  
shall work it loose, an apparition,  
massaging aching muscles, will be seen  
to bare bone under sheath of satin  
to a cautious wind whose rub  
and polish wears the roughness from the sea-soft bough  
to flesh of Naiad, till a wave-wrought Daphne stands  
naked in branch crooked reach of limb as shimmering silk  
creeps over coral endodermis brought  
to dawn-shell over blood-reach  
of the sun through wood.

## VARIATIONS

---

When the frost settles  
on his whiskers and quickens them  
into the stiffness of sensitized rods,  
as fault-finders, catchers  
of unwarranted lint, or as critical  
reviewers of the wind,

the faint chill of a phantom worry  
crawls inside my bones  
but on the next thaw of his whiskers  
exits as a ghostly sweat.

That is why I am never  
convinced clear through  
with a cold that would break my bones,  
by the freezing of a residue  
of doubt within them

for, after all, it is only frost  
coated to the softness of amiable hair.  
There is always somewhere a fugitive sun  
which is prey to innumerable whims.

## LIGHT WIND AND A LOCOMOTIVE

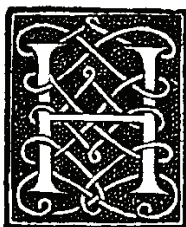
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Sharp gray darkening.  
Apple-green the evening air  
along the margins. From far  
across the valley floor  
a long thin wail  
raveling on a rise of wind  
from incredible distances

as underneath  
the ambiguous warning of the locomotive,  
of the premature evening star  
smudged boot-prints make  
a mark of expectation  
on the sky above the mountains  
staining into a line  
of promises somewhere  
for someone else.

## STRING FIGURES IN A GROVE

---



LOOKED OVER outspread hands string  
flashes, darts,<sup>14</sup>  
forms squares and rhomboids up  
leap-starts through grove,  
whose hands display cross twigs and sticks  
loose-bound to intersecting points of buds  
blurred to excitement,

through a slit of smooth  
and pliant youth laced into saw-slip of diagonals?

Burnt briar and blackthorn  
caught at crotch, jointed and link bent. Rood-screen  
mottled in a fiddler's glade, all of its grasses  
bristled high, pricked up for listening  
at tip of every blade for sounds of sun.

Birds quiver at urgency of mind-bolt nudge.  
Nothing has crosses behind the fretwork,  
and to while the time to variety  
of stem and shade, those hands  
which loop and pluck the string  
are threaded and prepared to rush apart,  
lash eyes with new designs  
within which constant winds  
act out a new concerto.

---

<sup>14</sup> Strong flashes, darts ... The patterns of leaf, branch, and twigs is compared to the game of "Cat's Cradle."

## CHALLENGE

---

So it is snow  
in the throat again,  
forced there,

driven almost to the threshold  
of bronchial blockade  
against my own breathing  
in its lunge against invasion.

Snow! A weapon —  
and I have none but obstinacy —  
surges, speeded into like  
of gust to that  
which backs it downward  
to its starting place.

It is snow  
ice crisp of air  
as knuckle-duster of the wind  
that reviles me.

If it were not  
for this force at lock  
of horn and brace  
of shoulder with equivalent  
boldness, I would no longer  
be propped into this  
upright posture

and this walk would only  
be another recital  
of feet counting cracks  
that intercept routine.

## AT BREAKING POINT OF SKY

---

The blown-glass evening rings.  
Sky strains, tightened  
to the limit of its elasticity,

and high along the cold curve  
hums the ghost tone  
of a bell at after-strike,

the long taut sound  
of endurance at the end  
of stretch, at weakening  
when silhouette of spire or chimney  
is enough to rupture it,

when an incisor star  
might tremble once too much  
and jar against  
the blister top that shields us  
from the light that weighs  
against it, thinning it.

A single word  
dispersing silence might  
unseat that star.

More deadly  
than a shower of glass blades  
is whatever force a rupture  
in that sky might loose on us.



## **POSSIBLY ONE DAY**

---

A galloping meadow  
never gets anywhere in spite  
of all the speed it means.

Bounding, unaware  
that it has been created  
thwarted,

                    it hurries  
its high hair over earth  
that lay beneath it,

but not one inch  
to the better  
by delight in travel.

## **AND FINALLY THE MOON**

---

Here it comes  
almost too strong  
for the hiding  
of the clouds that hold it  
in a stubborn  
maternal grip.  
At last,  
it melts them  
breaks away from them arrogant, silent,  
out on its empty own.

## A MEDITATION ON SPACE

---

Seemingly there are several  
types of spaces. There is the space  
in which all of the galaxies  
are set up in business,

the space called *pleuroma*  
in which the myths play out  
their old stories in perpetual re-runs,

the space from which you fall  
from the edge of phenomenal  
existence when you die,

the space crammed  
into our narrow conception  
of space and time,

the space which is the setting  
of a dream.

Put a three-dimensional  
object or person in it  
and it is *place*. These spaces  
all are One and Holy.

## SUMMER NIGHT-WALK

---

Disturbance along the quietest  
of country roads; a branch flutters  
its leaves, reveals its catch  
of descending stars, slowly  
coming down between them,

maintaining dogged brightness  
among the fickle greenish lights  
of the fireflies, risen to meet them.

The straight line drawn  
by the coupled headlong lamps  
along the distant highway,  
and here the comforting  
crunch of gravel  
holding these feet to earth.

## ON MONDAY

---

When the wind  
wears the clothes  
which I hang  
on the line,

the wind looks  
much better than I  
when I wear them.

An actor of talent,  
that wind!

# PLEASE COME HOME

You are only a clean  
little clump of cloud  
out there  
on the horizon. Cute,  
you look kind of nice like that:  
puffed up and fuzzy,  
keeping the wide blue  
at the edge of the sky  
too busy to be a bore.

A pleasant change for both of us:  
a time for me to get my darkness  
going,  
filling up with flecks of gold  
and whirling into a tight twist  
spun at such speed  
it almost buzzes in my eyes;  
the way I like it.

You never did,  
or ever showed me yours,  
but hated mine,  
prided yourself on being blunt  
about it, begged me to throw it out.

Yours was a thorny hideaway  
crammed to the top  
with thumbtacks, turkey claws  
and tire treads,  
the kind of hutch  
you have to run away from  
to the horizon  
to puff up for a while on your ego  
and float or ooze oily  
as if with innocence, maybe to fool  
the idle and the romantic  
until the air cools and you flatten.

Then you have to return  
if only to shake the flakes of rust  
from the spikes on your coffee table.

Of course, I miss you,  
if looking at you in outline  
packed solid with double-parked cars  
and underfed dogs is what I mean,  
or bearing one of your usual lectures  
still discussing itself in circles  
above an empty setting at a table.

## **THEM**

At the melting of night  
into morning,

gnawing intermittently  
at infant flesh  
or dawn,

like psychic chiggers:  
stars.

## IN THE STRENGTH OF THE MOON

---

So now you have seen them  
where the driveway swings close  
to the house:

the slim high spears  
planted among the pebbles  
like staves,  
the swinging lanterns,

a spread of antlers  
which almost snagged among the branches,  
beak-thin and curved,  
the probing muzzle of a fox  
frozen  
in the sight of the floodlights  
on the porch,

by the loss of identity,  
remaining just enough  
to break the paralysis,

to continue beyond it  
and into the woods.

Why, then,  
do you look at me that way?  
Perhaps you never should have come here  
and have seen them. Maybe because  
I was with you  
when they passed the house  
and it was my driveway.

# NOVEMBER

The lightness and delicacy  
of dried leaves stretched tight  
across a spread of twigs  
which terminates in crushed claws;

this after sundown  
often. Sometimes floating  
on the surface of my hair,  
fumbling at the root  
of my skull or grazing my cheek  
as with the touch  
of a whisper  
saying, *Now,*  
*come now.*

I course maps with a finger,  
count costs,  
consider the calendar  
and cower in forgetfulness,  
but even under all of that,  
hard knuckles  
and the dried claws  
of the dark against the shuddering  
glass in the kitchen window

rasps the old hunger  
and more of an echo  
of a still-resounding ache alive;  
I want you

and the nights  
are afraid for me.

## NEW ENGLAND OVERCAST

---

It sweats outside  
today.

There is such a stinginess  
with water now

that even mature drops  
must be husbanded

and only a damp sigh  
may be expected  
from clouds.

Remember  
how on such days as this

you were so quick  
to send me  
back to my center of the swirls  
of fog that edged out  
in feelers  
from under the bed,

how accurate  
your timing  
when you retrieved me  
for the sun's return

while madness  
was settling in the folds  
of the curtains

ready to drip the night  
away  
with hammers.



## THIS FROWSTY AUTUMN

---

This autumn has done  
nothing whatsoever. The leaves  
stand idle. They speak no carrot  
nor paprika. Holding their summer  
green, now out of style, they wait  
until the proper moment  
for loosening.

By then they will  
have been filmed over green  
with golden brown  
as if garnished with furniture polish  
drying ever inwards from  
the edge until they dry up  
and fall away,  
their patience ended.

## **SURF AND SNOW**

---

I look beyond you to where the waves  
build up black through a mist of snow,  
then, swelling smoothly about the shoulders  
of the jetty, fall apart gently  
into curds of foam, fold inwards and retire,  
sinking submissively to rise once more.

They do not carp at me, scold me  
for my long gaze, following  
their comfortable routine. The gulls  
squeal to one another through  
the driving snow, blown white  
through the droplets of the spray.  
Their chief concern does not occupy  
itself with whose eyes ride the winds  
upon their private trajectories.

Look now, the fledgling crests cap over  
a cluster of chilling bottles. Spume  
flies above the hot chocolate dispenser,  
shrouding the soda tap with puffs  
of prodigious plumes. My eyes be-spelled  
by thickening layers of green with lace  
of cream throughout, now find themselves  
compelled to seek a lumpy freighter  
laboring at the horizon, with the every-day  
of her weighty cargo and getting nowhere.

I hear you speak, and I ask  
that the waves subside. I turn to you,  
half-blinded with the hammering  
of the winds, with spray, and you  
tell me that I unsettle you  
by looking at you, that I am  
indifferent to all else.

I cannot make you see this ocean  
of my very own, the majestic desolation  
of these unencumbered sands,  
and of the imperious gouging of the tides.

## A DAY FOR A GREAT ADVENTURE

---

Another day for a deep plunge  
into the swell of a great adventure.  
I shall be ready, but the waters  
are slow to rise. I shall look  
at the conformations of the clouds  
and the mist on the horizon, the attitudes  
of the scavenger sea-birds  
and the shadows on the shoals  
of the fish on which they feed.

This is all preparation.  
I do nothing throughout these months,  
but listen to the slats in the boardwalk  
talking underneath my tread,  
clean my fingernails on the edge  
of a clamshell and avoid the searching  
reach of a light along the beach  
from an approaching beacon

and always turn the sharpness  
of my focus inward to where  
the great whelk<sup>15</sup> in the climb  
and descent of his spiral  
nurtures the genesis  
of all sublime adventures,  
as is this,  
and every other poem,  
and as the moonlight  
on the surf exploding.

---

<sup>15</sup> *Whelk*. A predatory mollusk with a spiral shell.

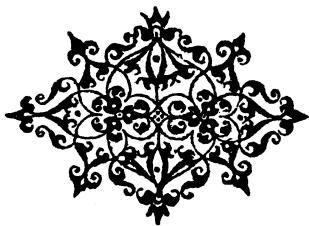
## THE FIRE-BREATHING SPRING

---

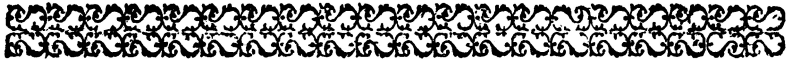
Goodbye, Winter. Who knows  
when I shall ever see you?  
The Spring's hot breath  
will blow all of you away.

When shall I once more  
feel the cleanliness of cold,  
the muscles compact  
like springs wound tight  
and sleep which eliminated  
the ambling nights that dawdle  
and keep no commitment  
or bring the thin dawn fluting  
to my chimney early?

Winter,  
I shall miss you sorely,  
the tinkle of your midnight skies.







# IN SUDDEN SECRET

## **THE BRAGGART HILT**

Theft from a carousel, fist-filling things;  
snatches of talk, the urgency of beat,  
the flash of steel a smile  
    in slivering windows, bone  
locked into posture crusted false in elegance.

I could be a charlatan and like it, be myself  
and like it even more. Trombone  
on the rocks, a dash of gin, and wit  
salted among the sprite-lamps could be some of me  
or all, mocking the jingling of this street  
    with dancing selves  
were I not so determined to have none of it.  
The braggart hilt beneath my hand is cold.

Chilled trumpet splashed with brandy in a ready throat  
is twinge of malice in my mouth,  
assassinates.



## DRAUGHTS OF CACOPHONY

---

I arrived here robbed,  
nothing inside me, darkness in my head  
and leaking from my eyes. Even the ground I walked upon  
was stolen. Thus I came to fill the vastnesses inside  
my limited domain. I swallowed clash  
of store with store or restaurant in display  
of beckoning and from the grossness of feigned oddity  
gained in solidity. I snatched at staves  
swung at the thresholds of percussive palaces  
and kept them for a final hitting back.  
Crazed to rawness by vulgarity, I covered burn  
with sting that counter-bit, made of each sense  
a wall against myself which hid my emptiness  
with temporary surfaces for feet and fists  
to batter with the rhythms of revenge.

## THE VOICE OF NOW

---

This *now* has nailed me to a swelling *must*  
and though it may run bramble-ragged  
over everything, no one will notice it  
until I tell. My bell would crack a tower in two  
if I should wait while resonance grows richer, for this *now*  
is loud within my mouth. Its sudden taste  
is iron touched by ice and jolt of shock  
that loosens grip on words and words will go  
smashing the slats of louvers as the stroke upon  
my gong-side kicks my whole compulsion up and over,  
sending it ton-stroke down upon another *now*  
not quite so sharp. This *now* has nailed me  
to a swelling *must*. I shall be torn upon this growth unless  
it snaps at bell-tongue sundering when *now* has struck.

## IN A YEAR'S TURNING

---

Oh may my heart's truth  
Still be sung  
On this high hill in a year's turning  
— *Dylan Thomas "Poem in October"*

When once we came  
in on one another,

and hung there,

if only,  
but for that moment  
until the rope wore through,

dropped us,  
and sent us sprawling

and snarling,

all was our silence then,  
my love: our seasons,  
deceptions,

scrapings from years past  
lodged edgewise  
in our throats.

No arguments.  
No lies. No insults. The truth  
roared from noon  
rampant,  
Home!

But Autumn  
was already fetus  
in the belly of August;

in terror,  
to be later dropped  
split open and divided,

in our course of custom.

## **WHEN BRASH WORLDS LIVE**

---

All the grotesque, bedizened and bizarre  
occasions and their causes, all who wear  
a minted excess of accepted oddness, run  
a clatter-pace about me, while a minimum  
of strangeness settles at my side, becomes  
more colorful than any one of them.

Thorn-print phantoms of my own inhabit air,  
walk skull-tops hoof-bright swiftly over crowds,  
hover on chuckle at the obvious rind encasing vanity.

I know them both. As single entities  
they tire in tawdriness, when intermixed  
they swirl, a bold stew for the hunger hour  
that pours untempered chili down its loneliness.

## **RUBBISH TO BURN**

---

Here in this jungle din I keep my void  
for you to fill, though that with which you stuff  
its vastness will not stop the crumbling and the final fall  
of walls surrounding it, yet paper lace, plastic and paint  
in fluorescent scorch are cargo which will be no loss  
should they be loosed upon abyss when floor dissolves  
abandoning its load. A hoard of trash  
is better fare for pockets than a blood-warm gem  
at threat of robbery, more thorough than petty snatch  
which tweaks the muscles of your hands. Your penny gear  
totaled upon the pin-top tilt on which I live,  
I keep to jettison. Since I have lost  
my ember gift of God, I heap your rubbish high.  
My looting gains me bulk to spend of space, to feed  
my trap-door luck.

## ON THE MIDWAY

---



HEREIN STALKS honesty: a prancing hag  
splashed with a play of gauds  
on upraised arm  
lifted to taunt the long-unneeded moon  
with ribaldries; who cuts the night sky  
with her knuckles,  
sharp with paste set in a knock-jaw outrage,  
aureate in brass  
upon a talon curved to gouge, if gouging gets  
the slim essentials of her sustenance,  
power and the skill to blind,  
but not much more. Her candor is my strength.

Her hawk head tilts an imp-inch to my laughter.  
We have added each other's totals till we understand  
each other as no one ever will. I know  
how soon I shall be traipsing through her property.  
Too long the week-lag for the wine-deep pluck  
of string bass stolen easily in areaways to be a memory.

One beat  
calls for another, calls for light in spring  
of carnivore across a meager street, for drifts  
of idlers seething  
at the curb. More shove than motion, more remnants  
than a feast,  
yet many a meal of gobbets from a chain of halts,  
of conversations, and a cup of tea were mine for cheating.

She could plunder me,  
but never has, for I have robbed her first.  
I know the ripest areas for lingering.  
She keeps her harlot hand cupped for my change. I drop  
a button in, dislodge a diamond nested  
in her rhinestone swirls.  
I know which socket grips are wearing out.

## BREAKING THE CURSE OF BLANKNESS

---

Your eyes,

from the darkness  
and the contours of your face,

drawn by my stare

and into both of mine,  
where, pupil to pupil,  
they were matched and mated;  
dusk upon dusk  
and into a quivering  
rinse of gray, blue, green  
and the sand-warmth of shallows,

while inside,  
and all about my head,  
your voice resounded.

Your eyes,

floating on the glare  
of the desk lamp that guarded  
the muteness of paper,

which paralyzed my pen

captured my compulsive straining  
and reduced your voice  
to a faint sigh  
from the dark of another waking,  
and the paper wrote me.

## IN SUDDEN SECRET

---

That maverick nerve  
that one, dear-waking bristle,  
shudders throughout these  
limping matins to the hum  
that is your listening.

Now in the silence  
of your absence neither of us  
speaks, though both of us  
exchange awareness as easily  
as words, when the stark  
hour invites us.

It is but natural now  
to count the pulse of silence,  
to lean into the aura  
of another and, if the quickness  
of the eye receive  
the perked scratch of a smile  
like crook in lilt of frisking  
eyebrow winking from over  
shoulder through the dark  
to know,

                    and in that knowledge  
love in solitude,  
therein rejoicing, as if in cell  
                    in rogue nerve  
in collusion,  
and in sudden secret.

## **OPTICAL ILLUSIONS**

---

My bones are bare now;  
gnawed down by moonlight  
and picked clean.

They are flashes,

a scarce width more  
than flickerings

of recognition.

When you sort them,  
they know your fingers:

the silver bowl,  
the icy water,

their convulsed appearance  
on its surface,

and in your hunger.

## **WHERE TENSION IS**

---

To perch upon a threat, from dare to dare  
I move in all the moments of my sitting.  
The wan clock tires with ticking. Accumulated strength  
rears to the ultimate event.

No longer now  
the sly sulk sliding under fire escape.  
I strut a parallel to danger, quick to hide  
the hot jest flickering with every step,  
the bite of triumph in my teeth.



## COLLECTING THE ECHOES

---

In the scarce time it takes  
to inhale and exhale air,  
you dropped your body, which lay  
on the speaker's platform  
like a rag doll, discarded,  
which no one wanted;

limp, helpless, an imitation  
of a man. The gun voice that shouted  
*you* so loudly reverberates  
within my ears, and you,  
as the perfect flame you are,  
looking down on your insulted  
body, with an eyebrow  
lifted with the brutal shock,  
haunts me, and will  
until you become the lost  
shell of a memory in mutilated air  
which I cannot remember.

## LEFT-OVER LAUGHTER

---

*For Richard*

They say that you walked  
right off the edge of the world,  
while they also tell me  
that the world has no edges  
from which to drop,  
(although mine has,  
on several levels)

and that means that I  
cannot call you back or twist  
my fingers inside your collar  
as if to drag you back;

you would resent it  
and would look at me severely  
with your mouth tightened  
into a thin line of vexation,

and properly affronted,  
from your appearance  
of posture, you would walk  
off the edge of the world again,  
from the edges of space and time,  
of sight and sound,

with the loose ends  
of the wood shavings  
of your laughter left hanging  
from every budding bough.

## THE ACHE OF EAVESDROPPING

---

Voices press in upon me;  
I carry them, snarled and unsorted  
at the base of my skull.

It is as if I were  
constantly pressing my ear  
to a keyhole  
that kept back all but the gist  
of a conversation.

Somewhere  
at a known address  
in another city,  
details lie scattered  
about on a table  
in a locked and abandoned room.

Day and night, explorations  
of breezes finger them  
to nearly verbal agitation.

This I find almost unendurable.  
How far and for how long  
can anyone stretch hearing?

## **NOT THIS TIME**

No,

*no!* You are not  
going to spring at me out of the wall  
again.

Tonight  
you are not  
going to clap your countenance

full-face, three quarters,  
and profile, all  
at one glance,  
you Cubist, against my eyeballs.

Not tonight,  
*please!!!*  
This is not a permanent  
prohibition. I ought to be  
used by now  
to surprises  
with you in my repertoire  
of hallucination,

but not tonight. My nerves  
clamor for a respite,

and that hyper-fidelity  
recording of your voice  
makes a single second's extra use  
of the resonance inside my skull

for a speaker,  
I shall go mad  
and lose you.

## SO LONG FORGOTTEN

---

I was not ready for you,  
when you told me  
that you were returning.

                    I wanted,  
did not                      dared not  
                    say *no*,

that I refused to see you,

ice-picking an old thirst  
into an overflow  
of loneliness,

said yes, met you,  
and relearned a long  
forgotten torment,

that yours is a sweetness  
that lingers, stinging  
in the throat,

that a dim fear of rejection  
whets an edge  
on your demureness,

that it cuts me,

and that my love for you hurts  
more than grief.

## ALL ABOUT EDDIE

---

When he writes  
the walls around him  
blaze like a gauze of sunlight

as when it stretches  
in slant sheets  
downward to the moss  
untorn by branches

through an endless  
flow of motes,  
his musings dazzle  
in their up and on,  
on streams of brilliance,

humming of that  
which ought or should be,  
which was  
and is

with an insatiable appetite  
for oats  
sown wild!

## THE MOST UNWHOLESOME TAX

---

Those who would dangle  
a threadbare gratitude  
like the worst  
of the history of a long  
dead rat by the tail  
in front of our noses,

forever believe that we  
will do practically anything  
to rid our eyes and nostrils  
of its swinging;

their tithe for the slightest  
favor to be exacted  
on all our endeavors  
for the rest of our lives.

Friendship freezes  
in the draft of taxes.

## KING-MAKER

---

Salesman of scepters,  
you cannot tape the sizes chosen  
daily  
by my head for any reason.  
I own no size for capture.

If you eye one of them  
out of the lapse of a minute,  
you will have to wait  
a year of tape into a pleated wad  
of contrafactual folding.  
before it reappears for my  
entrapment.

You cannot stunt me.  
I shrivel upon choice  
into a hag-bent morsel of  
insuperable  
spleen, crisped to the fit  
of a hangnail on a crooked finger,

as surely my need for such  
return to royalty shall runt me  
into an excess of that acrid most  
which is my excellence

in which I shall be frequent,  
to your displeasure,  
sudden upon the tiring  
of your unaccountable urge  
to maneuver me into a socket



of limited but indisputable  
circumstance according to the  
dictates  
of your strategy,

which manipulates you  
daily, while I sit here,  
bunched on a hydrant,  
scratching my brain.

## A SPECIAL THOUGHT FOR SHREWSDAY

This poem should practice  
sabotage under your fingernail;

when you poke at door bells,  
explode  
when you type,  
drum its disgruntlement  
throughout the day,  
then slip out  
with the stealth  
of its entrance,  
or defy needles  
and hydrogen peroxide froth,

even while the most exuberant  
effervescence  
bubbles it all about  
with buzzing  
as it settles.

## UNWANTED FOREIGNER

---

Silence may hover near,  
as mendicant, its wide-mouthed  
basket  
readied for alms of words  
of dubious value;

any will do,

or with nether extremities  
tucked up into lotus, head bowed,  
palms mated, forefingers  
pressed to mouth and chin,

will wait for nothing  
and rise,  
clothed in meaning.

Silence solicits bribes  
and burns them.

## NOSTALGIA

---

The tall shade crooked  
on a potted lamp  
inside the long slit of a window  
and the little head<sup>16</sup>  
that turns and squeaks  
upon the roof while signaling  
the dusk and crescent moon  
make me think of you  
this early summer evening.

---

<sup>16</sup> *Little head.* A rooftop ventilator fan.

on a whistling morning.

## BOHEMIAN PHILADELPHIA

---



TUNTED, ALL OF IT.

Stunted. Buildings sawed off  
before their full growth  
had been achieved. Short in temper.  
Where else do they hurl you  
to the floor of a bakery? Here,  
where frustration rises,  
curls over and condenses

downward into echoing streets.

You suffocate  
as you gasp your way between  
those two indifferent rivers  
through pinched thoroughfares  
and alleys where the lamp posts  
prop those whose raincoats  
mold precarious bodies  
from heaped accumulations  
of loose hardware,

when the moon smolders  
with the sachet of dead cigars,

and shadows  
snap back underfoot  
to their sources,

where unattached and  
articulated bones  
deal in the architecture  
of stacked drawers in  
mahogany,

fretful with the old brass  
clatter of handles  
and mummified mistakes.

## SHIFTING GEARS

---

The dawn had caught up with us,  
long before we had planned  
to dispense with the riffs,  
the wine, the beer,

and after the floor  
had conspired with the benches  
against our bodies;

when the streets  
were not yet ready for morning  
excursions, being loyal still  
to late-hour strays, as foolish  
now in appearance  
as unextinguished street lamps.

We dug our claws deep  
into the snarled roughness  
of the pelt of duty,

even though our eyes  
hung from their sockets  
at the ends  
of exhausted thongs,

even though the bones  
in our legs were too soft  
to support  
the weight and aging  
of that last eight hours.

## THE HOUSE THAT SHOULD BE

---

I would have a house  
on that hill, at the top of that  
great, gray tumble of moraine.

I would have a house  
with a watchful spruce  
beside it; some purple asters  
growing at the margin of the path,  
a paint-worn wheelbarrow  
and a chicken coop,  
its residents out  
picking here and there;

and the house would be low,  
gray-sided and lumpy,  
its porch roof sagging somewhat  
with the comfort of a shoe,  
disreputable, down-at-the-heel  
with years of vigorous wearing,

and in the evening  
smoke would stand up  
from the chimney, groping  
for a slender thread of moon.

## IN MEMORIAM

---

She was worn out,  
exhausted. She had flung  
her ice-axe upwards  
where it caught in a ledge  
when I had found her.

I told her  
that the air was much too thin  
up there, that the summit  
was slippery. I told her  
of others coming, who might  
dislodge her on the way,  
of those who would not  
welcome an invader, as I was slipping  
half-way to a better place  
but nowhere near the bottom.

She said I could be  
a quitter if I wished.  
I told her of the great expense  
of dressing for the role,  
the loneliness, the friends  
that she would leave behind,  
and of the scarce good manners  
practiced at such altitudes,  
that climbing down was in no way  
any easier, but that I  
had found a cave for comfort.

She vanished thereupon  
into a puff of cloud. I wonder  
whatever became of her,  
or if she remembers me.

## WHITHER THE ROAD

---

A road swirls back into the forest;  
gold beneath the headlights here  
where it opens into the highway  
curling forever through the gloom beyond,  
where the moonlight speckles  
downward through the blue of trees  
going apparently nowhere,

taking escaping eyes  
toward a broadening valley  
rich with the patchwork of meadows:  
goldenrod and Saint Michael's daisies,  
the long, still mirror of a river,  
two horses grazing quietly  
at the entrance to a covered bridge  
to what, what other distance  
and whatever further woods?



## **DAYS OF RESURRECTION**

---

You came back to fill in  
the hole that you left in the air,  
as more than a handful  
of scattered feathers, a phrase  
that hung from the ceiling  
and the sharp presentiment  
of never, which all  
of us had chewed on.

And I had told you of the beauty  
of the church, dismembered,  
how the long years had made it  
scarcely a building which stood  
on earth, how the long, slim columns  
sprouted tiny wings at their tops,  
of the lightness of the gallery,  
and how the windows arched across  
the bending of sycamore branches.

Of how the pledge that had been made  
had been fulfilled, but I never spoke  
of the smile above the doorway,  
nor of the honey-golden floor  
of silk that mellowed to the sun.

## BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

---

Instead of window blinds  
these heavy drapes, fringed  
along their edges  
and gathered up in swags,  
are almost breathing. The sconces  
on the wall challenge their gold  
too starkly in this room  
of candles and false brocade.

My papers stacked upon  
a little table with a marble top  
promise no salvage  
to my withered pride. I walk  
on memories of spilled sugar  
on the floor, conscious that my breath  
might break something expensive  
and original, something that its owner prizes,

and the humming deep inside my head,  
as of a thousand bees, increases  
to a steady roar. The scrub pine  
that almost leans against the window glass  
scratches it daintily. A vase,  
no higher than I am, puffs smoke  
from its open top, and I go  
to the double doors in terror.  
I twist at the stubborn knobs.  
Of course, the doors are locked.

## **OLD GOLD**

---

Old gold, the deep orange  
in the taste of apple cider.

Old gold, the low slant  
of the afternoon sun  
that stains the bark of trees  
and brings the breath in snatches  
with the knowledge  
of Autumn on the way with goldenrod.

Old gold, that shimmers  
clear behind the tears of memory,  
like a creek bed under water.

## IN THE CAVERN OF THE CARNIVORES

---

A grand piano painted cream  
crouches on gilded claws, its keys  
outstretched as in a wide grin  
of sadistic expectations.

The concert harp that stands  
beside it, stands as a queen  
also in gold and crowned,  
a royal presence, its tall strings  
quivering in ill-concealed contempt.

And I am only a battered trumpet  
in a chorus of polished brass  
yet barely able to release  
a wretched squawk.

My feet are awkward on the carpet.  
A stocking yields to the resignation  
of a thread and runs, feeling  
like a spider starting down my leg.

My slip peeks out and the hem  
of my dress is crooked. If I  
could escape down the pathway  
of shallow steps to sit beside the lake  
and dream! But no! A golden drop  
of another hour has fallen on the rug,  
and I am alone in the cavern of the carnivores.

## NO MORE NO LESS THAN THIS

---

No more no less than this.  
You are the basic nourishment  
of the earth, an energy for which  
no responsibility has been required of you.

I demand nothing from you  
although I would steep in your presence  
if I could, in my knowledge  
of your aloneness, in yours of mine.

I trust you and in that  
there is rest and peace. That is all  
I mean (if I do not  
embarrass you), when I tell you  
that you are beautiful  
and that I love you —  
a simple statement.

## AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS

---



THE STAIRS swirl in descent.  
Eyes watch the break to freedom  
of the scuttling steps  
into the pit,

and every muscle in the body  
longs to follow, sailing

head first downward  
on the dip of a hawk.

But you dare not even  
think of it. You stiffen  
for a moment at the landing,  
getting your nerve up.  
sensing and hearing the crunch  
of splintering bone, the snap  
of spine in your head.

Not now or ever  
but in dream as a drift  
of tissue paper, not  
as with the impact of a sack  
of unarticulated bone,

but a soaring  
to a transitory stop,  
a breath of standing  
like a butterfly.

## YOUR KIND OF BEAUTY

---

It embarrasses me  
to acknowledge a cropped crag  
    like you  
as that one figure, towering  
always out of touch and time,  
yet always near enough  
to constitute an invitation,

to acknowledge that leer  
that others like  
to think of as a smile,

as that constantly  
missing promise  
in the glare of a hawk  
which hangs over me

like a taunt from elsewhere  
and an instigator  
of that inescapable gnawing  
at the root of my thighs;

an abscess  
under consciousness,  
which frets at the edge of vision;  
your kind of beauty  
now.







BAD COMPANY

## **HULDRA**

---

She is Swedish, and one of *those*,  
you know. Big. Green eyes and red hair,  
all clinging velvet and ropes  
of beads in the front, with cold  
and cleanly chiseled features.  
Real Nordic beauty  
with a chalk complexion —  
and no back at all.

None. All coming at you, dead ahead,  
and steaming down on you,  
with nothing whatsoever  
to back it up. In front, solid, but hollow;  
a shell of half a woman is what she is,  
and I ought to know  
because one evening I got behind her.

It was at this party,  
you understand; the one for the author,  
newly arrived (who lost the address  
and never did). She must have been tired  
that night, or careless. She almost  
never lets it happen.  
Always back to the wall.  
Back to a crowd of other backs.  
Back to the fireplace. Back to the upholstery  
of chair or sofa. So no one ever  
gets behind her to check the rumor.

But this evening  
she had been standing in a corner,  
trying to make the stem of a sweating  
martini glass behave between the thumb  
and fingers of a cotton glove,  
and while concentrating

on her problem, she moved a few steps  
forward and outward. I immediately  
squeezed in behind her,  
and what I saw: —

Well, nothing. Or rather,  
*everything*: you, the tall clock ahead of me,  
my own red gown in the mirror. If I stared  
until my eyeballs heated, I could just  
make out the finest thread lines  
of a drawing on the air: head, neck, torso,  
and long, full skirt. I tell you,  
not only does she have no back,  
but the back of her front,  
as seen from behind,  
between her shoulders, is transparent.

## THE CONSULTATION

---

Doctor, I must not have this child,  
for it will have no bones to support it:  
a poor little thing that can neither  
stand nor sit nor use its hands, with a sponge  
for a skull throughout a lifetime.  
Can you imagine such a being as an adult?

None of this would come about  
were I to drink of its father's blood,<sup>17</sup>  
but I am allergic to blood  
or influenced by conditioning.

Its clotting, its curdling,  
its fibrinous texture estranges  
my stomach; my pyloric sphincter rebels.

And is there any guarantee  
that death will in any way alter  
or adjust my digestive system?  
Doctor, I refuse to vomit the blood  
of anyone all over the landscape  
and perhaps forever.

No,  
I must cling to my beliefs  
in the powers of garlic,  
trust every weekend to its down-home  
savor, and daily keep my windows  
curtained against that mournful face  
which entreats me nightly and politely

---

<sup>17</sup> *Its father's blood*. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the vampire converts a female victim into a vampire by inducing her to drink some of his blood. In Eastern European lore, a child born of a vampire and a mortal mother has no bones.

from the fire escape, and try not  
to hear his fingernails squealing  
in frustration against the glass.

Doctor, this child to be  
has got to go.

## **NEXT TO NOTHING**

Next to nothing, or the genuine thing,  
rewards the seeking, the circuitous walk  
till night hangs heavy with unborn day.  
It was hardly the dragons under manhole lids  
that brought you to this jumble of loose heads.  
You never thought to find them here at all,  
    but everyone  
talked of coming here to look for them,  
encouraged you to guard your socks against  
    escaping flames,  
to look out for fumes, and to watch for lizard eyes  
squeezing slow winks from under propped-up tops.  
You failed to find a single one. What did you see?  
A sand-rough haze beneath your eyelids?  
Your own legs brittling to the moon-death wind?  
Next to nothing, or the genuine thing?

## ELEGY FOR ALEXIS

---



HAT SORT of wind.  
Alexis, covets your house?  
What kind of claw slips  
over balustrade and grabs  
your guest, leaving the slender ledge

a vacancy of gusts that tells  
the searching host no tales  
of sills below, counting down  
twenty stories through  
the death-blue haze to asphalt  
and the smash that ends all stories?<sup>18</sup>

What sort of wind,  
Alexis, wept within your rooms  
and wiped the stars  
from all the windows  
at the night-hung edge  
above the senseless reeling  
of the universe, that filled  
all space with panic force  
and swept you over,  
bowled barbell brace  
of door-block from its lock  
on life and drove the hoofs  
of stallions through your loneliness?

What sort of wind,  
Alexis, breeds within the ear  
that listens for you and behind  
the eye, squinting up height  
of wedge at fork of avenues  
to the last brink of mortality  
that climbs beyond the indecisive

---

<sup>18</sup> *The smash that ends all stories.* A guest of the sculptor Alexis Romanovich fell to his death from the artist's studio in the Flatiron Building. The artist himself died there sometime later, purportedly from a heart-attack. The building is infamous for the cross-winds which form where Twenty-Third Street intersects with Fifth Avenue and Broadway.

glide of paper scraps  
on thermals swirled past your last  
floor on earth  
to where you are?

What sort of wind,  
Alexis, urges us to seek you  
as you once had sought,  
to know only the thin ledge  
of the parapet where dust  
is rushed in endless search  
of self  
where there is none.

## ALWAYS ONE MORE TIME

---

Up the nobbled<sup>19</sup> sides that line the well,  
up each protruding stone  
after the eyes have taken in  
its shape and size as fit for hands  
and feet to feel for looseness or security.  
How slow this limb-stretch climb  
that grazes skin, brings a hard hitch  
to equilibrium as underneath  
the half-swung weight a rock  
has given more than its  
endurance will allow.  
At once, a new deep-rooted  
hold is sought for, found and tested.

Up the hair of God,  
ascent continues, all four  
searches fumbling blind,  
till sky intrudes  
to judge each new configuration  
a starveling second,  
before the lid comes down.

---

<sup>19</sup> *Nobbled*. Rough-hewn quarried stone.



## **BAD COMPANY**

---

If a thick green discharge  
oozes from underneath his fingernails,  
and stains the carpet,  
or if the teeth in his smile  
gleam solidly with stainless steel,  
a bad evening is probably  
ahead of you,  
if not a frightful one.

If she brings in a dazzle  
of chandelier lustres and a stiletto laugh;  
if her heels strike sparks  
from the parquetry and her hair  
retracts visibly into her scalp,

meditate, if you can,  
upon an inexpensive lawyer

and fire insurance.

If the two of them  
arrive together as a team and vanish  
upon the moment of appearance,  
scrutinize the fireplace,

then, if any sort of ankles and shoes  
whatever hang into it  
from the chimney,  
saturate the whole house  
with the stench of cabbage, even  
if simulated, and take your leave.

Close the door smartly,  
hang some bacon from the knob,  
and run like hell.

## MOON DRINKER

---

You soaked up more than your fill  
of the moon

last night  
                    when I saw you  
on the front step  
offering the moon the full of your face  
and turning it  
this way and that  
for saturation.

I could see how the day to come  
would know you,  
                            pale,  
as you always are  
at the breakfast table,

but in that shuttered room  
of yours,  
your face would mask itself  
closely in a delicate  
radiance,

strengthening  
with any slightest contact,

as between my palms,  
burning  
in memory later.

## THE CALL OF THE TINKLING CYMBALS

---

They are here again today.  
Their fingertips are alive  
with buttercup bells. Patterns,  
cut out of the sunlight,  
play over the flowers that dance  
in the winking of their hands.  
Hear them. Already the air  
is rain-waiting,  
pausing upon its patience  
until the end of the celebration,  
through which, the children,  
peering above the sills  
of their eyes, are asking  
if I am harmful.

Is it not foolish of them  
when their chants cling to the corners  
of my darkness after their dance  
is done? My rooms are still  
and weighted, thick with the heather  
on the breath of the gods,  
and all night long  
with the invitation  
of the fire in the bells.  
These are my kinfolk,  
who counsel me in the singing  
of unknown birds.

## EAST HILL IN A SUMMER RAIN

---

A night-black toad  
with a spot of crimson  
on the top of its head  
sat puffing on the steps  
of the veranda.

No one else noticed it.  
They all spoke softly  
of the flooding in the cellar.

I gave the beast a respectful glance,  
but it would not budge;  
its reality remained unbroken.  
All is not lost  
if such creatures still exist,  
as does that one.

An emaciated maiden  
in a long white gown  
wrings her nearly transparent  
hands in the rain  
by the roadside  
and peers through  
her long, lank hair.

I shall mention,  
in passing, the smoke  
from the witches' cauldrons  
that rises from holes  
in the woods,  
(you can see it  
any early morning)

but the unicorn  
which dances on the tops  
of the mountains  
will have to be  
numbered among the several  
other omens that lurk there,  
awaiting human circumspection.

## ON HOVING'S HILL

---

Ghosts and their counterfeits  
on Hoving's Hill  
are met as equals. I shall be difficult  
to find if you should search  
for me among them,  
for I am solid;  
I take up space and may not bring  
my bulk of blood and bone  
in stride across the fence,  
but still I wander there  
and prod at them,  
testing for skin and hair  
for rind of wind and sun-games  
shot with shadows  
finding out which ones  
ascended Hoving's Hill<sup>20</sup> and fell  
in Hecksher's pit<sup>21</sup>  
just as the sun went down,

how many  
and which ones of them  
are likely to return,  
if anyone, once more  
supported by that sand-dump mound  
remembers how it was  
and when,

---

<sup>20</sup> *Hoving's Hill*. A dirt-pile in Tompkins Square on the Lower East Side was called Hoving's Hill, and was the site of Hare Krishna cult events attended by poets including Holland and Allen Ginsberg. Thomas Hoving was appointed Parks Commissioner in 1965. The park became the site of social unrest during the 1970s when music concerts took place there, and riotous confrontations between hippies, police, Puerto Rican youths, and local Ukrainian immigrants.

<sup>21</sup> *Heckscher's pit*. Hoving's successor as Park Commissioner was August Heckscher, who dug up parts of Central Park for almost two decades. I could find no accounts of construction in Tompkins Square, but this poem suggests that Heckscher levelled Hoving's Hill.

how long he stayed  
and whether ghosts in guise  
of men drop all pretense  
in Hecksher's husk  
of an inverted mound, itself  
the ghost of Hoving's Hill  
turned upside down.

## ST. MARK'S CHURCH IN THE BOUWERIE: OFFERTORIUM

---



REMEMBER IT ALL quite clearly:  
the pelting feet, the half-shouldered  
overcoats, the near brutality  
with which some  
two dozen persons including two  
vestrymen  
stumbled and tramped over  
seated parishioners

to reach the aisle, of how it opened  
to their record dash, how they blocked  
the front door in terror and would not move,  
when in the church behind them  
there was nothing.

Dust. Sunlight. The old smoke  
of a sermon rising above the heads  
that were filled with the aroma  
of a Sunday roast, while the oven gauge  
crept cautiously upon its deadline  
and awoke them to a motion  
at the far side of the altar,

which after a moment of definition  
brought them to their feet  
faster than the first bar of a hymn  
and launched them into a panic-pounding race  
down aisle, through door, into the ugliness  
of street outside, ugly enough to reassure them.

I saw her at the Epistle side  
of the altar, an exclamation mark  
of a slender girl, the bulky bell  
of a crinoline blossoming from her waist.  
One chalk blotch of a hand at her breast  
to secure the long triangular shawl,



the neatly-bonneted head and two nailhead  
eyes that seemed to bore into it  
or into the bone behind it,  
swaying as on a light breeze  
that changed position with the slightest  
stirring of the air, poised a good  
half-foot above the floor with sunlight  
creeping between the hem of her skirt  
and the tired carpeting, wavering  
in a paroxysm of nonfocus, rippling  
violently from head to foot  
as all the details turned to haze,  
cleared back, smudged fuzzy,  
fixed their focus once again  
as through binoculars and suddenly  
wiped off, went all to pieces in a scattering  
of blurs which swiftly disappeared.

And that was all,  
absolutely all! The church lay still,  
fumbling about with its budget  
which would not repair the rectory,  
candles to be lit that they might  
be seen by all men. I saw hers,  
guttering, nearly transparent  
against the stale sunlight, flickering,  
wobbling like the candle flame  
upon the altar, still here as then.  
When? 1860, before the candlestick was broken.

## **RIDE UP THE WIND**

---

Still heard, still flute-song flying  
on the sea-wing, still aloft,  
do not glide further downward, do not come  
closer to sand and rock than you are now.  
You have already come too close.  
I hear your feet that once picked rain-stop  
pinpoints on a pond, on flat of sole, walk  
as the rest of us, tamping the earth beneath you.  
Since the herd has hemmed you in, required of you  
a pace as footwork-weighted as its own,  
you are as one in sodden finery, your hair  
bedraggled, as all who are afraid of self  
see themselves mirrored. Would you humor them  
by feigning poverty as no one thinks he does,  
as everyone feels that his fellows must?  
Ride up the wind,  
as one who skimmed the breakers of the plumage,  
stiffened hair with sea-spout water brilliants,  
made the vast dance of the after-gale  
your chariot, ascend  
with all in arc-sweep upward who follow  
and understand.

## A REPETITION OF THREE

---

These, the approaching three on all these streets  
come, and are come upon, once more advancing, come  
on a never-mind loose lilt of limb, are gone  
to come once more, three plaster masks  
    against your going,  
come from whichever place towards which  
    your going leads.  
come as if marching on your origins.  
At gasp of knife unsheathed, at altercation  
sprouting a scattering of heads at window sills,  
at black of body down at flash of fists,  
    in crowd-throb nucleus  
crushed against the entering lurch of anyone,  
a flashlight bleaches them to focus from the others  
as words made flesh at blood-shock  
on the sword-breath thrust,  
words flesh-clasped instantly on thunderclap,  
    and coming,  
come on the gray of waiting. From stunned sense  
at birth of violence, they come reborn.

## PROTEST FROM A SINGULAR PROFESSION

---



HOUGH ONLY a common house-ghost,  
skilled to pass through brick  
and concrete  
much as cold comes unrestrained  
by voile, through no acquired  
technique,  
but as a function of me  
which repeats itself with me as message  
I must fault this skill  
as action independent of control.  
It sifts me down  
to concentrate of dust and light  
on which I draw for substance  
in a single stroke of smoke  
self-sculptured to existence  
in a humanoid advance on space and time,  
shaft smitten through to both  
of them and rupturing both utterly  
in service of that eye which otherwise  
lives bounded by its blindness and all  
without my authorship or questioning.  
Intent is sight of me,  
speaks of itself instantly  
when I appear, calls out  
in illustration of its argument  
which is my pose, the purpose  
of my gestures and my full  
attire styled into focus of address  
which often goes mistaken.

Time and again the contact cracks  
across the centuries  
and misses;  
                  time and more time  
for shock alone, an empty house  
of unintended secrecy as what  
went by unspoken  
                                  keeps on  
speaking still in waste  
of spatial rhetoric  
                  in vacant rooms.

## A POET DECLAIMS IN A GRAVEYARD

---

Clouds congregate  
and shadow blots the stone book,  
laid open on its fluted lectern,  
that the wind might skin the names  
from its pages of marble,  
and repeat them with endless sobbing.

Your papers rebel against  
their anchoring pebbles. Your hands  
press them down at their edges,  
grinding them into grooves  
of disregarded names in support  
of your thrust of passion,

as your throat throbs  
with remembered loves, the aftertaste  
of werewolf revels,<sup>22</sup>  
and the leap of dolphins.

The deep grass shudders  
to the roots as the vanguard rain  
chatters on splitting slate.

---

<sup>22</sup> *Werewolf revels*. This poem is about Jack Veasey, the Philadelphia-born poet who first came to New York in 1975. A werewolf poem was the centerpiece of his first chapbook, published by The Poet's Press that year.

## ORIENT MOON

---

There is a rabbit in the moon,  
a fetal rabbit, closely cramped  
against its curving rim,

his shoulders hunched  
about his head from which the long ears  
flow down rounded back;  
a neatly-packed white rabbit  
with a mixing bowl in foreleg  
hug that holds a month of salad.

Smudged eyes no longer brood  
above us. The rabbit profile  
looks beyond the earth, his eyes  
half-closed in contemplation.

Now the honey drains no longer  
into dreams and sickens them,  
but the inverted salad bowl,  
plastered with lettuce leaves  
hangs over us. Our madness seeks  
no sweetness from the night.  
Our ease wizens with vinegar.

This is a rabbit-ridden  
Orient moon, which has no need of us.

## SCHERZO AT LAVALETTE BEACH

---

After those centuries of practice,  
after those long rehearsals  
at the far end of the beach  
where the wind so often wove your hair  
with sunset laced with cirrus,

why have you come here  
far too drunk to keep four legs  
beneath you and in good shape  
for support?

Look at you now!  
There they go, spraddled to ungainly  
four-sag stance of a calf  
too young to know its balance.  
With your stag's hindquarters  
and elegant knees, your human torso  
raised as figurehead above your lithe  
potential for sylvan grace,

you dare to slump there  
over your auto-harp, your legs  
all out of tune and your hair  
sweated to slime of a rotten dock  
at the moss-edge under water.

You are a poor show  
for a local monster. After the town  
had paid you off in gin  
for dooryard dances, you drowned  
Killarney in a sodden croak,  
and when you could have sung  
in pine-croon the incantation  
of the seven seas you had to plunge  
your hind legs into the tulip bed,



whence vomiting the Pleiades,  
you left their ghostly star-tears  
on the seedling lawns.

Go tear the beach apart  
and come back sober.

# THE BUDDHA IN MILKY QUARTZ

---

Infusible,  
insoluble within the haze,  
thickened about  
the question of Nirvana.

In trigonal,  
trapezohedral chamber cracked  
to snarls of veins,  
within the steam-skeined  
cloud of skin,

the ever-soul

lives, *mudra*<sup>23</sup> of silence  
and solidity  
in quartz-crazed stupa.<sup>24</sup>

Carbon dioxide  
and *samsara*<sup>25</sup> crowd the highway  
of the inner eye  
that ends all roads.

---

<sup>23</sup> *Mudra*. A movement or pose in the practice of Yoga.

<sup>24</sup> *Stupa*. A Buddhist monument.

<sup>25</sup> *Samsara*. In Hindu religion, the endless cycle of death and rebirth.

## FAMILIAR CREATURES

---

I know that someone unseen  
shared that house  
with me

who circled the table  
in darkness of thought

around and about  
all night,

whose typing  
came in gusts from the bathroom,

who played organ  
at night in the grove  
outside my window.

None of this  
had anything to do at all  
with the tall figures  
with the heads of animals

drifting in procession  
outside on the curving gravel  
of the driveway

with the strength of the moon.

## **ARACHNE**

---

Very well, then.  
You have decided to forego  
your civilized appearance  
for the moment and to go about  
in your costume for the other role  
you play for your entertainment.

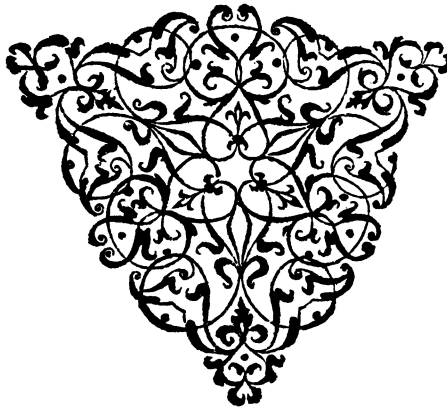
You settle over there  
in the corner and crouch  
on your eight hairy legs  
with all your knees bent  
up higher than your head  
which is like a fluffy ball  
on an elaborate stool.

Only now  
you are getting older  
and a good bit fatter  
and your hair has gone  
grayer than before,  
but you are content  
to sit like that  
and to look at me.

Years ago, you  
would have terrified me  
by doing no more than that,  
but I care little now.

I see you these days  
with all your knees bent tight  
against your underside  
which is turned up  
like an ugly little flower

or the fist of one frustrated,  
and I know now  
that that is exactly  
what you are, Black Widow.  
If only you could thus  
be seen by others!







# OUT OF AVERNUS

## MEDUSA

---

Spray. Thick and heavy dawn. A day  
clouded, sucked, swirled, exploded, pouring back  
into the sea. The hiss of serpents rising from my head  
as mist in streamers writhing across this rock.  
The night with horrors rising on the wind,  
flung by the breakers at my feet, their jaws gnashing.  
Tentacles half-hidden in the beards of weed  
hanging above the down-pulled anger,  
the recoil, and massing force.

Even these golden wings and iron talons  
are little help against the full attack  
constantly made, withdrawn, and reasserted  
against this rotting molar in the sea.

If you could watch the quiet centered  
in the eddy of my eyes, if you could peel away  
the roughened hood of granite shrouding your own,  
if you could bear to see, as I, my hideous companions;  
the desolation of the night,  
far from the promise of Hesperides;<sup>26</sup>  
my madness; my sallow and emaciated face  
framing my desperate eyes, [it] would make you see  
my inner nightmare  
as so much greater than the nightmare that I am.

Mercy spares you, turns you to stone,  
that you may not see me, see [how] beauty in a face  
mortal and more than human calls forth no love;  
[how] any love of mine is walled around  
in igneous hardness,  
or torn from me, blown in shreds of icy spume.

---

<sup>26</sup> *Hesperides*. The distant location, far in the West, where dwelt the nymphs of the evening, in a garden of golden apples.



Kill me. Life waters at the eyes.  
Swing back your sword.  
Look elsewhere, lest your arm remain  
upraised forever.  
I must resign myself, in death,  
to a singular condition,  
to darker places, caves loathsome, crawling  
with sluggish saurians, cold in the deep recesses  
of the cess-pits of the gods.

## **THE LAST PLANTAGENET**

This night the third King Richard tips his nails  
with wink of homicide, assumes the claws  
that turn the prods of fingers into bayonets,  
and drops them in his haste. He crouches, pokes,  
crawls close enough to rough of wood in search  
for flesh-rip steel. His throne glows red-gel sodden  
with the seep of blood from ancient tragedies.

A shadow sprouts  
in maim-spit highlight and the fallen king  
reaches into darkness for the prong of greed.  
I watch, but do not drop to seek the blink of death.  
I keep bad company by accident.

## **BLACK SABBATH**

---

*Thou shalt not suffer  
a witch to live.  
Thou shalt not suffer a witch,  
or witches are dangerous  
merely in their existence.  
Four hundred years ago  
you burned us at the stake.  
Now in this steel-  
stitched century, you freeze us.*

How often have I been aware  
of you; your comings  
and your goings to that great bare rock,  
but until the night  
when I saw the pack  
of you, a vine-snarl  
of writhing limbs  
and naked bodies,  
coiling about one another,  
slithering over one another in the  
grey-wet light of Candle Mass,

until I saw some of you,  
beard-clogged with wine,  
bloated with overeating,  
greasy mouthed, foul fingered,  
until I saw you drinking  
the reeking blood of a baby  
who was born by accident,  
until I saw you stumbling  
and fawning before that goat-headed  
one, to whom you pledged me  
on pain of strangulation,

I had not summed up fully  
the implications of the whispers  
in my hair that made sleep  
a horror for me, when whining,  
creeping voices, like tiny hands,  
clutched at my fear  
receptors, saying that I knew  
that in my loneliness  
the silences carried your footfalls  
on ridgepoles, on spruce treetops,  
that I had seen the rush  
of brooms blow wide  
the mottled dust-mice from the sky.

I swear I did not see them,  
but on clear, still nights  
a sudden wind would blow my candle  
out, and send a rattling skeleton  
of chalk cold bones  
down my cringing spine,  
harp fingering bones,  
plucking a fleshless music  
from my vertebrae.

It was *you*,  
not I, who set me here.  
It was you who stripped me and stretched  
me supine as priestess-victim for the  
hollow Black-Mass throng,  
and it was you  
who gave me in marriage  
to the Black Master,  
setting the death-white wedding ring  
upon my finger, peeling a circlet  
of skin from it  
at knuckle top,

and it was one of you,  
who administered those vows  
which I must not remember.

And now I am here,  
in dark of woods, an exile  
mid juniper and fern,  
living on lambs' tails  
and huckleberries,  
stewing reindeer moss  
and ginseng,  
cowering in caves,  
walled in by fallen trees,  
quick-felled by lightning,  
guarded by gouts  
of mud against the wind,  
setting a watch  
against snake and spider,  
a dispenser of potions,  
of herbs, narcotics,  
of the unchanging lore  
set down in the books I read  
once in the winter  
firelight of my cottage.

Now rings and amulets  
send through my nerves impulses  
from their owners'  
personalities, as on the surfaces  
of rain barrels and ponds,  
I see the faces of the dead.  
The tornado-voiced pine tree  
roars through my understanding  
and fills out words of portent,  
of prophecy, of hidden knowledge.

And for my tithe,  
I give my core to cold,  
as my raw-boned Master holds me,  
filling me length-full  
of marrow snow, here on this high,  
treeless, earth-bare  
altar to moon-scoured emptiness,

I am the offering  
to the denial of love,  
world old, my flesh age cast away  
for the joy of a ring dance,  
(forbidden) which beat  
in the fire that used to bring  
goblins to the walls  
of my cottage.  
I grow hard and wind-bitten.

If I extend my hand,  
fear grasps the fingers  
of him who takes it. Terror  
trips the feet that enter  
my door, and my hunger for warmth  
is a fist clenched upon fright  
at the pit of my brain.  
I reach out  
and my hand snaps  
at rain-lash, holds nothing  
is wet and is clean.

Here  
on this height with this book  
and the type  
which goes blank as my eyes  
run from each word to each line,  
which erases itself  
as each page is leafed over,

with this deluge of light,  
hot on my shoulders,  
in front of those eyes  
out in that void,  
before this microphone,  
as ever when I was casting  
spells to the crows,  
as ever when I was cooking  
tripe on the hearth  
I am removed  
from the world-rush, an exile  
in floodlight,  
at lectern  
alone in my voice,  
alone on the stage  
alone in this cupful of space  
and time, naked  
to thought and unspoken phrase,  
unprotected from wish-forms  
and still alone.

*Thou shalt not suffer  
a witch to live.  
Thou shalt not suffer a witch,  
for witches are dangerous  
merely in their existence.  
Four hundred years ago  
you burned us at the stake.  
Now in this steel-  
stitched century, you freeze us.*

## THE ARGO

---



DAY AFTER DAY we waited  
upon her answers. She, who preceded us,  
walked brazen over pinnacles  
and ridges of seas,  
skipped over hollows, rode the sleek  
monster backs of the endless waves  
into the gaping crevasses between the stars  
whence she had come to us.  
We had known her  
first as a stranger in the sorrel-soft  
puncture of August and September,  
spear slanted down  
in a tumult of bellowing leaves,  
leaving no trace of her coming,  
of her passageway  
through an ecstasy of indigo,  
but hairs torn from her crest  
and floating high overhead,  
cirrus in Virgo.  
But could we expect  
serious instruction from the trunk  
of a tree that had woven a galaxy  
of suggestions in wind and sun,  
in a tide-flow of racing  
letters on moss and stone,  
even though we had stripped it  
of boughs and had hacked  
away all but her figure?  
How could we be so sure?  
She had governed that tree.  
Her hands had played in the branches.  
Her thoughts had given voice  
to the winds which had roared  
it to words. She had whispered the leaves  
into a scuttle of messages.  
We had tried to confine her,

naked in the bark-bare wood,  
yet had we found her?  
Now her crest scored the sky.  
From her helmet portents sprang  
for in an urgency of portent.  
Upon her breast, snake-sprawled  
and leering, the demented face of Medusa,  
defiant, peered out from the hide  
of a lion. I do not doubt  
that all of us had reservations,  
questioned, condemned as criminal  
foolishness much that she told us,  
that all of us, under our skulls,  
were as grey-eyed as she,  
and that all our lives  
would be lost in the ship and our plans,  
however logical, if we ignored  
what she told us.  
She was lunatic,  
storm-proud, a warrior. Three roads  
lay open to her equine impulses.  
Past, present, and future  
floated upon her shield: as one,  
as three superimposed,  
a trinity of troubling deliberations;  
clear in their separate entities,  
confused in their overlap  
and triple-deep texture,  
merging and swimming  
apart. They were not to be looked  
upon or endured.



Day after day, our ears  
were hollow cones to funnel  
her counsels into our heads, our ears,  
the rocking speech of the shaft  
against thole pin. Her lips  
were distant, high as her head was,  
floating above the spray,  
each splatter of which  
was a blister to ignorance.  
In Virgo we found the figureheads  
of ourselves, hewn from our trees  
of bones, touseled in the scrawl  
of our nerves and veins.  
At sun-focus, Virgo;  
riding the arrogant storms  
of our search: *Pallas Athena*,  
crouched in the tunneled coiled  
tombs of our heads.

Listen!

*Attend Sophia!*

## THE SYBIL OF CUMAE

---

Out of Avernus, up from beneath  
the overhanging rock and shifting  
of intensity of darkness, I became  
manifest in climax of joined brasses  
and bowed strings, declared myself  
in trumpet salutation, in carved  
and weathered wood, yet had not turned  
to face the open portal of my genesis.

This was my hour to pray,  
as music, concentrated in my head  
behind the ivory of brow, the gate of horn  
too bright to burn as sound shot  
upward in a beckoning of Pentecostal flame  
and wept its fire behind me,  
then flickered its hunger from my shoulder,  
died, and in its death, diluted darkness.

I was suspended, carnal, and yet flesh,  
light given form by creep of shade  
as from the march of clouds, of pits  
and of depressions upon the marble hold,  
hand on my forward thrust of vision.  
Brightness died and softened the desert  
of my body and I, alive, remained  
an artifact and out of Time.

Hear me! I speak in smoke;  
a web of spray obscures my meaning,  
moistens its brittle thorns  
and globes them with the eyes of angels.  
Come upon my presence suddenly  
to feel a sword and breathe away  
and leave you petrified, as I, an illusion  
of the deft deceit of portraiture.  
I bare you before the bold eye of the future.

Look and go blind. Hell lingers  
in a dust drift when the eyes  
are born again to morning, and retreat  
within the remnants of receding sleep  
to find once more the promises  
molded out of fog. Whether in truth  
of ivory or through hallucined horn  
the blast becomes your image,  
look on mine, high on the long note  
sounded over Hell, the golden leaves  
break brains and wake the dead.

## **COFFEE HOUSE POET**

---

Now I have seen her,  
who had always been for me  
a creature swirled from wave waste by the wind and rushed  
across the ocean crust,  
her hair, a cloud that carried  
stars that its haste uprooted  
and which clung to it like burrs.

Now she is all of this, and something more,  
something that echoed to my cloudy cross,  
beaded with sweat of God in evening amethyst  
which mingled with the twilight and inflamed the world;  
her world of crowd and noise, my world of agate drift  
and stains that spotted sundry pages from which  
I dislodged her,  
long before I sought her out, before her hair  
wept bitter stings of ice upon a butt-squashed floor,  
discarded star-sprouts swept away to grow  
in cracks that gape to cloud rifts  
where the floor had been.

## PORTRAIT OF LAZARUS

---



THROUGH milk-thick waters across your face  
stare at me, if you can. Although your  
eyelids weigh  
the cumulative poundage of the years  
clustered upon your passing,  
look at me, and in the strengthening  
of your gaze

break through the wasting web of cloud  
between your plane and mine.

Concentrated in the focus of your eyes  
grasp what your attention lights upon  
and merge with its reality.  
In one long look come back.

I have no skill to rouse you, have not dared  
to stir the fleece of sleep that almost shrouds  
unquestioned structure, hesitate to mar  
the structure under which you float,  
lest I should lose you with your image.

Currents strive with tides  
yet you are motionless beneath them,  
sway, widen, shrink, distort and yet  
in composition hang inviolate  
beyond the outer boundaries of life.  
I could touch you into fragments  
with a whisper.

Scream!

Like one who serves himself  
as Orpheus and binds the muscles  
hauling the hawser till a span of time  
is coiled upon one death  
and stings with sound the immobility  
of vacuum, then in crescendo  
ruptures his wrongful grave and climbs  
his brass-wind guide rope back to life,

ascend the sun stave to the surface,  
press hard against the clouds  
until their first threads disperse  
and wait before your mid-day will  
then turn the false integument of death  
to thinning night.

I see you soaked,  
Death's moisture on your face,  
your eyes still hooded against light.  
Until they cease to mirror  
the contents of your recent world,  
be sure to hide them.

Until the waters of the Styx  
no longer cling to ends of hair  
nor wait to drop in fall of globules  
to the living soil, I wait,

fearful lest they should fall  
in chains of poison to my skin,  
dreading the wisdom of the dead  
which holds your eyes.

## THROUGH SNOW, UNDER BLACKENED MOON

---

The night when the tired moon  
shriveled and turned black, the sky  
was cracked to spiders' legs  
of fracture on the boughs  
on which the snow-cloud mattresses  
lay heavy. Air was dense  
with the snow and trunks  
were packed to half-height in it.

Our candles broke their fragile thorns  
against its charging bulk  
and left us floundering.

This was no night for pilgrimage,  
for single-file wound in and out  
among the starved trees, for following  
what little we knew of what little road  
years of neglect had left us, for our search,  
now a dried husk of compulsion.

Long ago the joy within  
was whipped by wind and beaten  
into wicks too damp to soak up fire,  
and smoke was all we walked upon.

Yet still we moved,  
conscious of the black orb  
hanging low above our heads  
looming near enough to shove us  
in the ground and high enough  
to threaten the sudden drop  
of a whole world, mashing arbutus  
and our bodies underneath  
a meteoric corpse

watched by the saints  
who long had prayed for it  
and wrapped its darkness of retirement  
in their luminescence.

Friars, thieves, and the gypsies  
seek the outline of their future  
in its sheen and cannot tell  
its meaning, can discern no markings.

Saints know the original enlightenment  
towards which we drive ourselves  
through wind and snow,  
through what is left of trees  
while the moon shrinks  
and drains off virtue.

Only the saints have found  
the old route under snow.  
Their candles stretch proud fingers,  
claw-bright against the slash  
of storm, and touching  
as ours did not, a truth  
of snow-clogged stars we cannot know.

## THE HYMN OF THE ROCKS

---



ULLED BY presbyopia and childish prank  
he walked along the tide-line  
where assembled monks were said  
to crouch,  
cowled out of human form,  
a multitude of motionless and  
rounded backs.

The winds came down and harsh to flesh.  
No garment stirred. No hands came up between  
expectant face and grate of air.  
No shift of weight altered the position  
of limbs pressed against arteries,  
freezing under heft of granules, granite legs,

and yet his words swept over them  
and carved-out arms clasped about heads  
on upraised knees, smoothed over hard  
under lichen-crusting case of stone.  
Weed wept down pitted jaws in beards  
salt-caked in penance. Terns rode  
out icy skies of versicles,  
and then his speech was over.

Silence. The sea was slab.  
Adrift on wings, whiteness slid  
over blue and climbed to wait for all  
the beach to hummock up to life,  
and shout.

The child guide slid  
inside the door, shameful, as his master  
felt out forms of rock  
where all his audience was said to be.



The old man bowed, signed himself  
and all assembled there, as one, to God,  
turning himself away to drag himself  
on staff to storm-chewed steps  
and then, "*Hail, Holy Bede!*"

Unlocking from compact form  
from over hunching years, stooped  
from the crippling of millennia, the rocks  
swayed upward, loosing clasp  
on clench of secrets crammed in the crouch-pack  
grasp of bodies, letting out  
their hoarded senescence. All fissures spread  
as up through the strength of crags  
the bass notes crannied wide  
as gullies of vibration shuddered  
underground and all the seabirds,  
flashing to the risen sun,  
unsealed their hush of premonition,  
scrawl squealed through song of rock  
down-dropped by undertow  
to rumble underneath the ocean,  
*"Hail, Holy Bede!"*<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> This poem is based on the tale of St. Bede and the Singing Stones, from *The Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine, 1275 CE.

## MELUSINE DISCOVERED

---

They said my eyes were different:  
wider, deeper, darker, bluer.  
That is all.

So what do you say  
when the whole garrison  
bluders into the bath,  
and sees you

*like that;*  
your top half huddled  
under your hair, and all else  
from the waist down  
coiled fat and sleek in rolls  
of spots and mottlings  
in a pail?

Nothing,  
but your eyes swim in a season  
of dances, lost with all  
such seasons forever; lovemaking  
after the fashion of woman;  
a man —

*Keep her in her place,* he said,  
*pickled in brine.*

A fine kettle  
of snake-flesh for a princess!

Meanwhile, you wring  
your spine to pick loose  
absurd packets of leather  
and cartilage, then flap them open  
in his face.

That for you, nosy!

Look me up in the crotch-hold  
of the tallest pine.  
I shall be up there,  
swinging spots and mottlings  
from a bough in the starlight,  
and mind your careless huntsmen  
keep their arrows by them,

*Uxoricide!*

you keep your exile.  
Your wings, long in disuse,  
hang idle, like sections of loose bark,  
like an old door in need  
of a lock for efficient closing,

in which towers, falcons and mercenaries,  
still in action,  
draw on that extra darkness,  
that richer blue,  
numbed changeless by betrayal  
and rejection, and finally,  
upon escape,  
again by disillusionment  
with the tyranny of liberation.

## EURYDICE

---

He was never completely  
convinced of my presence. He felt  
that the minute he turned  
his eyes from me I might vanish  
as once, in fact, I did;

that a lover crouched always  
under a toadstool, ready  
to seize me by the ankle  
and, gripping it, would yank me  
underground, as if the surfaces  
I trod with him were water,

or that another might be hanging  
from a bough by his knees,  
fishing about with both hands  
in the dusk below  
for my hands, reaching.

There was one  
in the closet under the stairs,  
one in the laundry hamper,  
and one who sang madrigals  
in the smokehouse every evening.  
What an ear he had!

When he came down to Hades, singing,  
*What shall I do without Eurydice,*  
I all but answered him in song:  
as did you always  
*with Eurydice.*

He turned back to look at no one,  
and I laughed.

## THE APPLES OF SODOM AND GOMORRAH

---

I have her name,  
here in my fist, to riddle  
with my nails.  
I have her hair,  
which I extracted from the teeth  
of a comb I stole.  
I have her footsteps,  
embodied in mud, which I shook  
from her shoes one day.  
I have the parings  
of her nails, which I swept  
from her bedroom floor.  
I was her houseguest  
and ate my food unsalted,  
that my efficiency  
might not be impaired.

Now I shall take all her identity,  
rolled in a bit of rag,  
and I will make her a tree  
like those that gasped salts  
from the soil of Sodom and Gomorrah,  
for their fruit are leather bladders,  
vesicles that have no core,  
no substance and no seed,  
that loose a puff of dust when once  
you break their casings open.  
Such shall she be; so shall she bear.

Her fruit will fall and drop from her,  
wind in a husk of rind. Her children  
shall be born perfect, but two  
weeks after birth each one  
shall die strangled before the sun  
rises upon her arid acres.  
Her children are not hers.

They are mine, as he is, and always  
shall be mine. Therefore  
her children have been usurped  
I should have borne them,  
but his seed has been misplaced.  
Thus I shall take from her  
that which was never hers.

The Autumn of my anger  
closes in, scorching the edges  
of the meadow, calling  
a yellow challenge  
from the heart of a stand  
of hemlock, and I would  
throttle her, driving my drift  
of clouds into her windpipe.  
I would send flights  
of arrow-headed geese into her gullet.  
She shall have no success.  
One by one the offspring  
he has sired shall fall curled,  
brown and brittle on the grass.

But as for me, I shall be delivered  
of a *diabolus*, for now a maple  
blaze exfoliates within my womb.  
Acorns of hatred spatter  
from my eyes upon her roof top,  
making the sounds of half-crazed footfalls  
of horned and shriveled imps.  
They will not let her sleep.  
Their lidless eyes will watch her,  
lying beside my lover, pressed  
into a cast iron stupor,  
will watch my arms elongate  
through the window until my hands  
have touched her baby's throat.

Three have already  
been extinguished. One more  
means nothing. Since these  
four are not mine,  
they have no right to be.

They will tell her to be prepared,  
to hold a silver knife  
in readiness, to slash at my wrist,  
to search the markets daily  
for a woman with a bandaged arm,  
but my blood does not flow  
when I command it to hold back.  
My arms shall be bare and whole.  
She will not find me.

But I shall come again upon her next  
delivery. My shadow arms and hands  
will flow through keyholes.  
I have her name, a handful  
of mouse-brown hair, her toenail clippings,  
even a loosened, spewed out filling.  
I am a scavenger  
with a special use for gold.



## RECOLLECTIONS OF A MEMORABLE MAN

---

He is the horseman  
standing  
at the turnpike cutoff  
horse motionless  
yet twitching.

He himself  
in overworked denims  
and tee shirt  
barrel-hooped all the way  
up the torso  
in navy blue.

His vision is on vacation  
window shopping.  
his hair  
emeritus  
has retreated  
to a suburb above the ears.

He is out of place,  
but nowhere as much as his master  
with the halberd profile  
whom we remember  
drilling both elbows  
into spurious marble  
in a grease-choked diner  
with both eyes plugged  
into the reruns flickering  
across the beige  
and oil in the reinforced concrete  
of a coffee cup,  
while his Fruehauf rig  
lay by near the gas pumps  
dreaming of San Francisco  
and its City Lights.

## EARLY ON CHRISTMAS MORNING

---

Dawn leaves some timorous  
fingers lying on the splintering floor.  
The shack has shaken off the pains of night.  
Rising, the sunbeams prod  
at Joseph's puzzled face, breed thoughts  
of seeking out some new-baked bread  
and a cup of fresh spring water.

Light strengthens the smile  
on the sleeping face of Mary,  
fans out in triumph across the walls  
and sparks within Joseph's brain  
some private considerations:

How can that Child be mine in fact,  
and still be the promised Messiah;  
that tiniest beginning of a human being  
with the face of a Hierophant?  
Come on, let us do the best we can  
with this thoroughly perplexing morning.

## EMILY DICKINSON

---

She wrote her letters  
to the world, which received  
without response; her portrait  
on a postage stamp  
was issued much too late.

proclaiming her a poetess  
in answer from a world  
that knew no better

than to praise her  
with faint damnation  
through the sluggishness  
of first-class mail.

# MARTHA

---

*to Martha Graham*

Clean-limbed and carved  
clear down to bone,  
she stove the zenith through  
with tempered steel,

her cold face hardened  
by the moon,  
her black hair  
flying.

She whirled the blackness  
of the night around her.  
The muscles of her belly  
drew both in and down.

She learned from them  
the patterns of her hunger,  
became the burning goddess  
who controlled their power  
and throve upon its labors  
till she drove  
that dark beast to its death.

The stony passion  
of her mission strove  
above all life lend her legend.

The shriek of God  
compacted in her sinews.  
Her God alone.

## MARY DANCING: A STATUE

---

She, whose cape  
serves as a lodging  
for obstreperous winds.

whose hair provides  
the caverns for the nestling  
of small bright stars,

whose head is the dancing  
area for the leaping of planets,  
whose hands clutch in panic  
at the spread of the Milky Way,

whose farm girl's torso  
flexes its muscles in her dancing,  
whose small foot kicks impatiently  
at the interfering serpent  
which competes for position  
on the bite of the crescent moon.

Can this be she, whom last  
I saw demurely standing  
in a circular puddle of flowers,  
her draped head inclined  
as for listening and her hands  
joined loosely in supplication,  
quite unaware of the ooze  
of grace down the folds  
of her marble garments?

Can this determined dancer  
in the heart of a cosmic storm  
be truly the Blessed Mother  
of Our Savior?  
She can, she is.  
She shall be. Ever.

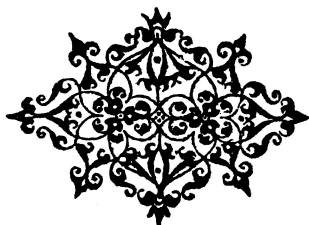
## **THE WITCH AGES**

---

Cast out your dead years.  
Once more this month among  
these rocks after your bowl of clay  
is emptied of the inky water  
and the bone of the new moon  
drifting upon that darkness  
has been drained.

Your youth will spend  
its wetness upon your lips  
and age will ring out  
all its ruin gladly  
when the bowl is broken.

Then blue will speak  
its secrets through the blackness  
of your hair, mixing new  
streaks of gray throughout  
your twinned and stalwart braids  
that drip cold water off  
their ends upon the thirsting ground.





YOU COULD DIE  
LAUGHING

## BREAKING DOWN THE NIGHT

---

When you are used  
to nights that are filled  
with flutterings and tweakings,

what do you do  
when you meet one which says  
absolutely nothing  
and presides stone-faced and obstinate?

What do you say  
to the darkness when its speaking  
has removed itself to most  
uncertain places or listens  
at the thin screen  
of consciousness, waiting  
for you to talk?

Will you oblige it  
with a volley  
of vituperation aimed at nothing  
in this world, or will you  
also wait, if only  
just to see which one  
of you can wait  
the longest?



## FROM AN OPEN WINDOW

---

Throughout the day the sun  
continued with its aureate drone,  
let down its screens of gauze  
between the passacaglias<sup>28</sup>  
of the branches, and played  
through the nearly imperceptible  
comings and goings of meandering  
moats among them. It leaned  
on the tallest trees and flattened  
the exuberance of the meadow,

It would have continued,  
had not its tone  
been insolently broken  
by a more aggressive splendor,

like the upstart suddenness  
with which  
                    first one,  
another,  
and a third of four  
inordinately tall and slender crosses  
blared trumpet challenges  
above a summit of foliage,  
each with a clear discoid  
heart of glass gaping  
from the intersection of its members  
as if in astonishment  
before a monstrous truth,

---

<sup>28</sup> *Passacaglia*. A Baroque musical form, a set of variations in which a short theme or ground is repeated in various voices in each variation, although completely new melodic material may be played over it.

or like the imposition  
of cadences by Richard Strauss  
from an open window;  
attendant also  
upon the wonder,  
but without surprise.

# PHOTOGRAPH OF A REFLECTION

---

*after a photograph by Donald Curran*

Nascent in glass  
a face encompasses  
the painted forms beneath it,  
floats within  
the ribbon width of smoke,  
is kept aloft  
upon a spire of flame.

Hypnosis  
in updraught  
rising in awareness  
closes in  
and coils hard against jaw  
and brown a harried want  
escaped from sensuality  
to thrill  
only in chilling cheek  
of glass. and wears  
the face of prayer to keep its torment closeted.

The night is tall,  
the fingered light extends  
a warning to the compline mask  
that disciplines desire.

With only force of mind  
that burns away emotion  
the spirit that ascends the cylinder  
of smoke from pane of glass  
can only drift  
back to the gelid surface  
and remain  
later as film of dampness  
which the hungry sun  
shall eat away.

## RETURN THIS NOTE REWRITTEN

---

Does the writing come up  
to the surface of the paper

if held above  
the flame of a candle?

or does it explode?

Look, friend,

even if this whiteness  
chokes on letters;

kicks,  
bites and scratches,

squirms in its seethe  
in so little space,

it is blank,

as blank as the nonstop  
voices on the radio  
next door.

## **MAD SONG**

---

When birds have hoofs  
and fishes have feathers,  
I might believe you  
when you scoff at stars  
that agitate the bone  
behind your brow  
even though a flock of them  
might burn it through  
and riddle my own like shot.

Should my house  
be thundered frequently  
by tread of hoof, the blacksmith  
shoeing sparrows  
bring new flame to forges,

I might believe you  
far more willingly than that  
the smoke of such a fire  
had numbed the cortex  
of your brain  
                    which might explode  
should you ignore  
its tenancy as usual,

whether or not your conscience  
loves the lies it takes  
for makeshift sleeping pills

If, on the other hand,  
a school of trout  
should sniff about the chimney pots  
for scent of cats,  
lie headless on the skillet  
as a plumage fold of fluff  
sleeked into overlap of scales  
then I should doubt your sanity  
and mine alike,  
                                sign both away  
with salmon quill  
                to Mental Health.

## TERROR ON CORNELIA STREET

---

Somehow I never  
think about such things  
without  
                    distinct malaise  
of stomach.

                    Somehow,  
it will not do  
for me to dwell on butterflies  
with dark eyes throbbing  
in their orange wings  
that taper off  
in streams of fire  
without recourse to something  
solid to support  
my head.

Therefore,  
I must beg of you your mercy  
for your pitch of ball  
on brick might meet  
my head again  
if I should let it pass between  
your sidewalk and the wall.

The butterflies were beautiful  
but nausea  
and fear of crushed skull  
tell me that they are not.

## THE PITCH

---

The brush stroke which turned out  
to be applied upon the work's completion  
can be determined by the practiced  
eye, guided, as is mine, by intuition.

I capture it and sweep it backward  
with an unused brush which sips  
the painting from the canvas,

soon to be restored to palette  
after having been so carelessly  
misplaced, then find the brush stroke  
next before it, and remove *it*;  
then the next, peeling down the process  
in exact reverse, lifting all  
the brush strokes off in retrograde  
down to the dry weaving,  
leaving it as if untouched,  
as if no nightmares ever had  
instructed on it, false  
in respectability, by frame conferred.

I offer it for sale, dry  
as it is in bareness;  
uncommitted brew in solid nip  
to the bristles sniffing out  
both form and line in raw  
and eager brushes and a palette full  
as if untasted and untested  
as a rooftop dares to someone  
to do it all again,  
and do it well or just as it was  
to tempt me to undo once more.



## IN THE NICK OF TIME

---

It was quite simple; the people,  
who were no more  
than a scattering of soot  
at the end of a city block  
of cathedral nave, would be no problem.

By the time you had overtaken  
them, you would surely  
have accumulated sufficient  
altitude to rise and walk  
the air above them.

Once  
that reasoning got loose  
and fell on the soil  
in your skull,  
it rooted,

for suddenly  
you clutched at every  
pew you passed,  
at every chair back,  
fearing that each step  
forward might be  
your first one upward.

The pillars towered  
and faded into the grayness  
of an interior sky,

and as a doubt-laden glance  
slid their smoky  
solemnity upwards,  
you sensed a slight lift  
from a tug at your eye.

Then clutching at every  
available solid  
object along your path,  
you retreated  
to the doorway,  
and just in time.

## **IN THE MESH OF MAYA**

---

Mouths open in the mesh of Maya,  
snatching at whatever may be blown against it,  
in patches active, in others satisfied to savor  
the intake of a day. There where interstices  
do nothing more than breathe, wind plasters trash  
against the mesh, as always with any other meeting.

That keeps them quiet while the others chatter,  
talking with their mouths full as an uncoordinated chorus  
multiplying incoherence to a din that no one  
can ever untangle. Meanwhile the wind drops.  
The fragments still stick to the mesh as if in bite  
of many mouths, still silent until mesh nuggets  
are bitten off, leaving as many mouths with rubbish.

## NO COMMON GOBLET

---

Sorry to have slapped at you,

without warning you first,  
but had you reached  
aloft and leaped for that flagon,  
hung on bullroarer thunder  
above you, and had you  
secured it

by its stem,  
it would have risen  
from its present height  
above your hair,  
tearing you from the floor,  
and swinging you from the ceiling.

It would have dropped you then; it would,  
I can guarantee it.  
And had you failed  
when it bobbed  
away from you just  
as you almost had it,

or *it* had you,

on a clatter of ceramic wings,<sup>29</sup>  
it would have climbed  
to lunge at your head  
with all its weight  
of earthenware behind it,  
or would have swerved  
to dash its payload  
in your face.

---

<sup>29</sup> The subject of this poem is a Viking-inspired winged goblet which occupied a prominent place on display at The Poet's Press loft.

## A PARTY ANY TIME

---

A glass  
blooms in my hand:  
when did this sediment-  
besotted blossom  
root itself there?

The sixth in series;  
only five past ten  
and up  
to the knees  
in prose!

a proud night  
for the plotting  
of conspiracies,

knolled in displays of backs  
to thwart a stranger,

of switchable challenges  
and ears  
at prowl.

I wonder  
how many strata  
of expensive furs weigh  
upon my instant  
out.

## YOU COULD DIE LAUGHING

---

Suddenly you disintegrate.  
Your shoulders draw forwards and downwards  
as if you were sheltering  
a faltering match.

Your eyebrows escape for sanctuary  
in your hairline while the planes  
and ledges in your face  
battle with one another  
like legatees.

You cough and shudder  
on the verge of shattering. Your face  
claps a lid of marble  
on its contours of jelly  
and writhes in agony behind it.

Your mouth pinches  
down the unfortunate episode,  
clamping it into an interim  
state of suspension,

but under the shadow  
of your eyes, a squat godling  
with a swollen belly,  
still clutches at the hot  
and toxic seed  
of revolution.

## BANTAM EXECUTIVE

---

Clean-gearred for business  
and efficiency, scurrying upstream  
flinging river-water wide from bow  
in professional impatience,  
stiff-lipped portrait of a clerk  
turned manager, the runt ship<sup>30</sup>  
levels all nozzles for a signal  
which will cannon streams of water  
spear-forth strong enough to split  
a pile lengthwise or dagger  
through a warehouse door,

threatens a dash through shipping  
to a stripling fire, all set, all polished,  
dressed up for attack anticipating  
war-play and relishing its role.

The valor of this executive rescuer  
heats up chewed water orange-angered,  
boils in froth of mouth with wrath-suds  
of fanaticism, seeks catastrophe.

---

<sup>30</sup> The poem is a description of of a fire-fighting boat engaged in an exercise in New York harbor.

## VECTORS OF ADVICE

---

Pitch rises. Vectors climb  
in catch and toss of landings all the way  
up side of subject in black lacings strung  
in back and forth upwardness,  
and indicate, in shadow parody,  
their implications traced  
in wraith-tail up the surface  
of the argument.

Two arms separate  
in ninety degrees of difference,  
each pointing a favorite direction  
while, close at hand,  
another orders buses  
to leave the street for sky  
and shrieks its stunted arrow up.

I sit on curb by sewer mouth  
wait for a bus, space-borne to Vega.  
Signs tell me not to stand.

## LAST RITES

---

Our Great Aunt Sophia,  
whose very name evoked images  
of Cosmati mosaics<sup>31</sup> and Byzantine domes,  
was hardly the sort of woman  
to put ants up her nose  
or to snort them  
with hits of cocaine.

Not at the age of ninety-eight  
or any other would she  
indulge such eccentric fancies,

but when kneeling beside  
her casket for what my parents  
determined should be my final kiss,

I actually saw the little beggars,  
all three of them, marching  
in single file out of her nostril  
and down the parody of her face  
into her preposterous collar.

It was the mortician  
of this funeral home  
who was to blame, of course.  
He had never removed  
those two elegantly sculptured  
vultures from his mantelpiece,

---

<sup>31</sup> *Cosmati mosaics*. The Cosmatis were a dynasty of Roman architects and artists who created mosaics between 1190 and 1325 CE. Works done in emulation of their style are called, generically, Cosmati mosaics.



where they hunched  
their shoulders at either end,  
the eyes in their bowed heads  
watchful of every shadowed  
corner of a room which was all  
a flutter of candles;  
I can vouch for it.

## **DRACULA**

---

Dracula beats  
the dawn to my door  
after a night of heavy  
celebration with bits of twigs  
clinging to the black  
of his full-dress suit  
and a smudge across  
his snowy vest.

He feels the floor  
with careful feet, controlled  
as in ballet. He licks  
at his socks diligently.  
Damn that dust!

Renders rapt attention  
to trivial matters.  
Awakening his ears, he aims them  
in my direction, yawns  
and bares his minuscule fangs,  
blood and all with his white-  
tipped tail aloft, traipses  
to a Pharoah's mausoleum.



# TOWARD MAGRITTE

## KRISHNA IN THE AFTERNOON

---

One of my many selves  
sits on the grass  
with the children,  
driven by wonder  
at the marvels that come  
through our eyes, to sing  
in the chapels of our heads.  
Where the two brows  
come together, perched above bridge  
of the nose as a bird,  
Krishna alights,  
and the sun on the cymbals  
bursts within him on the darkness  
we have yet to break.

Suddenly, wind rises;  
the finger cymbals are stilled.  
I am another self  
with a workday tomorrow  
and today, as the death  
of my incense, grown down  
to the burning of my hand.

## **EXEUNT**

---

The wind is blowing the stars away.  
Tonight they flow down  
gullies widening between the clouds.

Will nothing block  
their passage, keep, at least  
one statement in its place,  
one tack rammed into Time  
from which, in due course, some  
will tear out and, slotted  
stream away, leaving our mortality  
one fragile scrap?

Clear out the clouds!  
Herd islands coagulate in fog  
towards any of the four directions

but with no snag of stars  
in straggle of stray hair, loosened  
by accelerated pace.

Crowd back the ragged edges  
from that bank of why,  
spare us our stay of stars  
in millions!

## SHAMBALLAH

---

Only those whose eyes  
are unaccustomed to unlikely scales  
of measurement or commonly  
indiscernible planes of existence  
will never see here  
domes, pinnacles,  
and tent-like structures with the gold  
on their ornaments  
gleaming.

For those  
of a lesser keenness,  
this is but a pocket lodged  
among massive peaks and crags,  
which only offer fallen stones  
and sand; perhaps the weathered  
remnants of a Chorten,<sup>32</sup>  
yet this is the Capital.

Here we are taxed and numbered  
in accordance with our several purposes;  
all of us everywhere: sheep,  
whose heads lift frequently,  
lest any breeze be freighted  
with the shudder of a dying gong,  
or the long growl in the monotone  
of *mantram*,<sup>33</sup> resonant within the earth.

Here  
padded tap on bronze  
incites to riot, awakens anxiety,  
hardens and tightens  
to the knot of murder.

---

<sup>32</sup> *Chorten*, a stupa, a Buddhist religious monument.

<sup>33</sup> *Mantram*, or *mantra*, a word or short phrase repeated over and over as a ritual.

Here also:  
the chorus,  
as if from caverns underground,  
climbs into zest of purple  
at the apex  
of a summer noon.

Here  
the genesis  
of any impulse ignites  
on a syllable.

## THE FEATHER-PAINTING LUNATIC

---



KIDDING the wind side downward,  
a seagull signaling in yellow  
winks heresy in green, affronts  
the sky in gash of color  
unexpected in a gull  
then falls straight down  
beyond the roofs to wing-games

of as-yet-untinted birds  
whose white ignites decision  
in the wayward rush.

What happened here?

Someone ladder-paced himself  
some stories well above  
the altitude where paint revives  
the victims of the wind and sun,  
on rungs that scuttle  
into clouds above the highest buildings,  
swinging the gallon can of dregs  
that just supplied the last  
dip of that decadence  
which splashed the mauve and violet  
on this gull's fellows, while lifting  
his own glad green  
to grace and boldness.

No one has seen it done.  
The ladder rears in evidence.  
The empty gallon dangles in bold  
flaunt of subversion, hung  
before the eyes of all.



Ask among the streets  
to find him in the city's coils,  
if there is anyone around  
who, to delight his evenings,  
will stand on two springboard  
bucking stilts with paintbrush  
in his hand to decorate a gull.

A grin, spread ring  
of gold across a face  
will answer before you hear  
the poetry that no one wants.

## **THE WHEEL RESUMES**

The Ferris wheel moves up  
after a stretch of waiting, lifts a car  
into the clouds and out of sight.  
You must not center on  
a single rocking item, for Time will come  
to swallow it. A quarter of an arc erases it  
in slow rotation of the spears whose barbs describe  
the wheel and write your memories about its rim.

We know the ink that tips the stylus,  
smart of the second stuck where no resistance breaks  
the scar inscription, ink that sours upon  
circumference, sawing stability  
with grit of stars. A carnival like this creates  
nothing unforeseen, engenders no surprise.  
The upward hitch is imminent. One day another car  
will hang upon the star-spit of a former one.

## **STRANGE FOREST**

---

Where were you  
last night when your fingertips  
groped over glaze of paper  
under hypnosis  
                    that your bandaged eyes  
might see where they had traveled?

Where were you  
when you shrieked the shrill  
of birches from the black of spruce  
as if your skin met scars  
and screamed somewhere in an alien wood  
where you had sprung a trap  
among the dried trees that rise  
from wounds, seared by a holocaust,  
a decade gone?

Where were you  
when the lithe trees tensed to surface  
of the paper and your fingers  
plunged in forest depths to be  
as easily withdrawn as are  
the infant fingers that the knothole  
jams when panic knobs the knuckles  
and the hole snaps shut?

Your scream unlocked your trance.  
We bared your eyes and still your fingers  
worried at a distant grove rooted  
in the shadowed gaps among the trees.  
You tore them loose,  
examined them as if for blood.

Were you in wilderness  
of fern and moss beyond the advertising  
tableau for a car, afraid  
of every path that failed you  
in the distant dark?

You left your fingers  
captive there when you returned  
and wrestled with the woods  
to get them out.

## **THE FULL-STOP DOOR**

I must get out, yet find the doorway sealed  
with brick and mortar. I have long appealed  
against the striate rasp, the grosgrain grind  
rib-run down clapboards till my louvered blind  
crisps corduroy-crazed, will not be healed.

Ridge-ridden down-space where an ample yield  
of stripes, gaps, serried slays fall into field  
of washboard abstract that seems to blind  
unmoving maps with motion,

my sight cross-crannies exit so concealed  
that frenzy falters, and the mind, once steeled,  
then grooved, smoothes flat,  
builds thought-reels so designed  
that nothing moves them parallel and lined  
in downfall like my own, which has congealed  
unmoving eyes with motion.

## **WATER BABY**

---

I seem to have you limp  
in my hands.

Like water,  
you are hard to hold.

An arm leaks stealthily  
down through my fingers.

A leg, flung over a thumb,  
kicks convulsively, almost  
pulling the rest of you  
after it, out and over,

and then my forefinger  
goes through your eye.  
Your nose sinks inwards.

I wish you would stiffen  
up for once, bone yourself  
back to some semblance  
of a human body,

and lend me an arm that bends  
only at the elbow.

I go on wishing.

## CELEBRATION OF THE SELF

---

Eyebrows bearing down  
upon a questioning stare;  
grim mouth;  
face whitened  
by a cataract of night  
about the ears, thick  
with its catch  
of stars.

Jaw set;  
hands heaped beneath it  
on the hilt  
of broadsword;  
shoulders  
cascading a garment  
in continuing  
downward tumble.

All these  
repeat themselves,  
pinched into one as a hinge  
between gigantic  
wings,  
as overflow  
of energy,  
caught by an instant  
in an image.



## **UFO**

---

Silence unbroken.  
In a smooth, high curve  
a warmly orange pellet climbs  
the sky and stops

above the poultry yard.  
Then on the same track  
backwards it returns and sinks  
into a stand of pines.

A dog barks, awakened,  
lapses back to sleep; the roof  
of the farm truck  
mirrors nothing.

Nothing remembered  
of this beauty, the night  
moves on. Quiet.  
Not a leaf disturbed.

## THE ARCHETYPAL EVENING

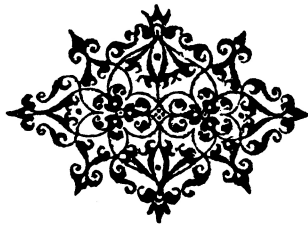
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So many Summer evenings  
when a farm goes black in silhouette  
as corncrib and scarecrow stand  
out sharply against the brittle blue  
of a slowly darkening sky

And the farmhouse seeks  
to be nothing at all but a bright light  
somewhere among hidden upper windows,

when as a slender wire  
the brand-new moon screams  
of its whetting, which I cannot  
hear, and the stars come out  
shyly in pairs and singles,

I have seen this happening  
some thousand times before  
and enjoyed it,  
in the silence of recognition.







## ABOUT THE POET

Barbara Adams Holland was born on July 12, 1925 in Portland, Maine. Her childhood was spent in Doylestown, PA and then in Philadelphia.

Her father was Leicester Bodine Holland (1882-1952), an architect who moved in mid-career to art history and archaeology. For a number of years he commuted weekly from Philadelphia to Washington, where he was Chief of the Division of Fine Arts at the Library of Congress. Later he taught at Bryn Mawr College, and also worked with the Corinth excavations of the American School in Athens.

The poet's mother was Louise Adams Holland (1883-1990), an archaeologist and academic specializing in the Latin language (her last work was a study of the Roman poet Lucretius). Her other passions were gardening, swimming, and exploring the mountains of the Adirondacks and Tuscany.

An aunt, Leonie Adams, was an esteemed poet, and a one-time Poet Laureate of the United States.

Barbara's sister, Marian (b. 1927), married an architect and lived in Philadelphia. Her brother, Lawrence Rozier Holland, became a physicist.

Her sister Marian McAllister writes about Barbara's childhood:

Barbara was sickly for the first year or two and had little contact with other children.

She taught herself to read, at first from labels on food packages and ads in trolley cars. By the time she was five she was teaching me, two years younger, to read as well.

Living within walking distance of the University (of Pennsylvania) Museum, where her father often took her, Barbara developed an interest in other languages, first in hieroglyphics, then in Chinese.

All three of us went to an old-fashioned "dame school" of some twenty-four children from the University of Pennsylvania community. The single room held "classes" ranging from kindergarten through sixth grade.

Barbara then attended private schools, graduating from the Baldwin School in 1943.

Barbara Holland received a B.A. from University of Pennsylvania in 1948, and an M.A. from the same institution in 1951.

Although she had completed all the course work for a Ph.D., she left graduate school without completing her thesis.

She worked in Worcester, MA on a new edition of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, taught at a college in West Virginia, researched genealogies, and then worked in New York City for a Wall Street brokerage.

Finally, the lure of Bohemia — Greenwich Village — and the life of a poet, became irresistible. With the slender income from a small cache of stocks and bonds, she quit working around 1962 and rented the apartment at 14 Morton Street in Greenwich Village that would be home for the rest of her life.

Her first chapbook publication, self-published and undated, was *Medusa*, a 20-page stapled booklet. Another collection, *Return in Sagittarius*, was published in 1965. Another chapbook was *A Game of Scraps* (1967). A projected volume of her poems with the photographs of Donald Curran apparently did not materialize, but the poems alone appeared in a slender chapbook as *Lens, Light, and Sound* (1968), reproduced in the present volume. Other small chapbooks were *Melusine Remembered* (1974), *On This High Hill* (1974), and *You Could Die Laughing* (1975).

Holland received a Creative Arts Public Service Fellowship in 1974, and during the following year was engaged in workshops and visits with many schools. She was a fellow at the Macdowell Colony in 1976. She read frequently throughout the Northeast at poetry readings, guest-edited two issues of Boston's *Stone Soup Poetry* journal, and read her work on radio for WBAI, WRVR, WUWM, and WNYC. She recorded for Folkways Records and on broadcasts for Voice of America.

The poet was also involved with The New York Poets Cooperative, a writers' group founded in 1969. A founding member, she organized and scheduled poetry readings they hosted at St. John's Church in the Village.

Her greatest success was in the then-burgeoning little magazines, and Holland could boast that her poems had appeared in over 1,000 magazines and publications. She was certainly one of the most-published American poets of the 1970s and 1980s.

Her association with The Poet's Press began in 1973 with the publication of *Autumn Wizard*, a sampler from her long cycle of poems inspired by the surrealist painter René Magritte. This cycle, *Crises of Rejuvenation*, was published by The Poet's Press, in 1973 and 1974 in

two volumes, and remains in print in a single-volume 30th anniversary edition. Other collections of Holland's work from this publisher include *Burrs* (1977), *Autumn Numbers* (1980), *Collected Poems*, Volume 1 (1980), *In the Shadows* (1984), *Medusa: The Lost Chapbook* (2019), *The Secret Agent* (2019), *The Beckoning Eye* (2019), *Out of Avernus* (2019), *The Shipping on the Styx* (2019), and *After Hours in Bohemia* (2020).

Another small press, Warthog Books, issued its own "selected poems" collection of Holland's work, *Running Backwards* (1983).

Holland's readings of her poems were from memory, even including her longer dramatic pieces. Audiences were riveted by her performances, whether of the spine-chilling "Black Sabbath," the self-effacing humor of "The Inevitable Knife," or the desolate sorrow of "Not Now, Wanderer." Michael Redmond wrote of her in 1981 in *The Newark Star-Ledger*, "[S]he is a poet who evades categorization. Her work has been variously described as romantic, mythic, supernatural and surreal; she is as adept at evoking a seascape as in creating a monologue by Medusa. There are city poems, and love poems, and poems both funny and terrifying. The common denominator is her extraordinary imagination, the classical precision of her language, and a wild sense of humor."

During her last five years, the poet was beset with health problems. She had difficulty reading her work, and her performances were marred by long pauses and memory lapses. After a series of small strokes, her health deteriorated and she spent some time recovering at her sister's home in Philadelphia. Returning to New York, she died there on September 21, 1988.

Several contemporaneous reviews and essays had acknowledged Holland's extraordinary gifts, most notably a long review by Stephen-Paul Martin in *Central Park* (1981), and a symposium issue on the poet in *Contact II* (1979), but Holland never achieved the fame she richly deserved.

Commentary about Holland, including interviews, can be found at [www.poetspress.org/fp\\_holland.shtml](http://www.poetspress.org/fp_holland.shtml)

For those who heard her, or who have collected her books, Holland remains a vital voice. She is still whispered about as "the Sybil of Greenwich Village."



# The Poet's Press

PITTSBURGH, PA

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

The body text for this book is Cheltenham, a typeface designed in 1896 by architect Bertram Goodhue and printer Ingalis Kimball. The fully-developed typeface was designed by Morris Fuller Benton at American Typefounders and released in hot metal in 1902. Until the 1930s it was a dominant type for headlines, and its legibility and character made it a popular face in Arts and Crafts publications, including those of The Roycrofters. It is still employed for headlines by *The New York Times*. The digital version employed in this book is ITC Cheltenham, designed in 1975 by Tony Stan for International Typeface Corporation.

Poem titles are set in Schneidler Black, designed by F. H. Ernst Schneidler for the German Bauer type foundry in the 1930s.

The title-page border and the block initials are from the press of Alessandro Paganini, son of the Renaissance Venetian printer Paganino Paganini (c. 1450-1538). This border was probably designed and printed in his shop in a monastery on Isola del Garda. Block initials are also by Paganini, using the same kind of arabesque design. Since the letter “W” does not exist in Latin or Italian, The Poet’s Press designed its own letter “W” to complete the available alphabet.

Other historical ornamental borders in this book are from Renaissance French printers.

The cumulative effect of this mixture of type, initials and borders is to simulate the production of a letterpress shop, whose compositor might employ, according to his own sense of balance and proportion, whatever materials were at hand, in this case spanning more than 400 years of printing history.



